

Freethought Today

Vol. 33 No. 1

Published by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.

January / February 2016

Texas governor lambasted for censoring FFRF display

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's decision to remove FFRF's Bill of Rights "nativity" display from the State Capitol building has been met with a fair amount of contempt . . . and deservedly so.

On Dec. 22, just days after the Bill of Rights scene was erected, Abbott, a Republican, ordered the display removed from a lower-level area in the Capitol. FFRF had a permit and had obtained necessary sponsorship by a state legislator (Rep. Donna Howard, D-Austin) to display the 5-foot-high metal scene.

FFRF is preparing to file a lawsuit against Abbott.

Dozens of media outlets reported on the issue in late December, and several were editorials or op-eds, siding with FFRF.

A Dec. 24 Fort Worth Star-Telegram editorial, "Bill of Rights protects this nativity scene," put it succinctly and accurately: "Bill of Rights protections often make people uncomfortable. This display should have come under First Amendment protection. Abbott's urging its removal was simply wrong."

"Actually, it was a small tableau stuck in an innocuous corner of the building," writes the Austin Chronicle's Richard Whittaker. "The image in question was placed there by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, which had been approved to place a depiction of the four figures surrounding the Bill of Rights, in what can only be seen as a charming homage to the Nativity scene. This was a major honor, especially considering that the Legislature places a Christmas tree in both chambers, but keeps the Menorah outside the Capitol gates."

But Abbott would not have it. He sent a letter on Dec. 22 telling John Sneed, executive director of the

State Preservation Board, to remove the exhibit from the Capitol's basement gallery because it "violates general standards of decency and intentionally disrespects the beliefs and values of many of our fellow Texans." He added, "Far from promoting morals and the general welfare, the exhibit deliberately mocks Christians and Christianity."

Hemant Mahta, writer of The Friendly Atheist blog on Patheos, also chimed in.

"Even more to Abbott's point: How is this display offensive?" he wrote. "It's the founding fathers, the Statue of Liberty, and a Bill of Rights. It's a loaded gun away from being a Republican's wet dream."

Rep. Howard told the Austin American-Statesman how she was frustrated by Abbott's actions.

"The governor has, on numerous occasions, commented on the importance of his faith as well as the importance of religious freedom," Howard said. "Unfortunately, in removing this display, he is silencing a viewpoint which differs from his own. I find that very disappointing."

And Texas Monthly writer Doyin Oyeniyi pointed out the irony of Abbott's decision.

"It's safe to say that the display's location, which the [Texas] Tribune described as 'hardly a high-traffic area,' would've received much atten-

tion," Oyeniyi wrote. "By using his position to remove a display that he personally found offensive, the governor has brought even more attention to it. . . . It's great if Abbott wants to fight for the 'accommodation of religion,' but that accommodation should include other religious and nonreligious beliefs, not just Christianity."



Texas Gov. Greg Abbott



Lauryn Seering photo

FFRF's Bill of Rights "nativity" display.

FFRF Attorney Andrew Seidel wrote in his blog: "In perhaps the greatest stroke of poetic justice I've ever seen, Abbott claims that our 'exhibit promotes ignorance and falsehood' and cites 17 lines of a George Washington quote — a quote that is fraudulent. Yes, you read that correctly. Abbott accused our exhibit of 'promoting ignorance and falsehood,' then quoted, at length, erroneous history to support his position."

Leif Reigstad of the Houston Press also commented on the use of the false Washington quote. "Here is a George Washington quote Abbott might want to consider next time he jettisons a group's display from the Capitol: 'If the freedom of speech is taken away, then dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep to the slaughter.'"

See you in court, Gov. Abbott.

FFRF wins injunction

District flouts live nativity decision

Breaking the spirit of the judge's injunction, the Concord Community School District in Elkhart, Ind., set up a life-sized nativity scene using mannequins rather than real people during its annual Christmas Spectacular.

FFRF and the American Civil Liberties Union of Indiana won a preliminary injunction in early December halting a longtime constitutional abuse at the annual school concert. It involved a 20-minute "live" enactment of the nativity by students while a school employee recited bible verses.

FFRF and John and Jack Doe sued Concord Community Schools in October, with the help of the ACLU. Jack Doe is involved in the performing arts department and took part in the 2015 concerts.

U.S. District Judge Jon DeGuilio explicitly barred the live nativity in his

"The Concord Community School District should be honoring the student and student's family for standing up for the First Amendment."

— FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor

preliminary injunction.

As ABC-57 News reported on Dec. 12: "The sold-out crowd at Concord High School erupted with applause following the school's use of statues to keep the nativity scene." Many in the school district are congratulating themselves that they "got around" the judge's ruling.

Unquestionably, the district, in thumbing its nose at the ruling, compounded the violation by including a nativity display at its public school concert, which is also illegal.

The student plaintiff, and the other nonreligious and non-Christian students, had to sit through the four concerts involving the illegal religious display and eruptions of support for it.

Not only that, but speculation over the identity of the local plaintiffs has been rife and ugly on social media. It appears the entire community and school district are aligned against one young student.

That's why the Supreme Court, for more than 65 years, has wisely interpreted the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment as barring any religious instruction, devotions or rituals

See Injunction won on page 5

Inside This Issue



Ron Reagan
— unabashed,
unfraid
page 10



Meet Eryn's
'adorable
atheist activism'
page 13



Brian Bolton
Graduate Essay
Contest winners
page 17

New editor of Freethought Today joins staff

PJ Slinger

Hello, readers.

I'm your new editor of Freethought Today. I am taking over for the inimitable Bill Dunn, who has been the editor since 2009 and has just retired (although he will still be bringing you the Black Collar Crime Blotter).

I've long been an atheist, probably before I even knew what that word meant. I was raised Methodist, but it never "took."

I don't believe there was a singular event that made me a nonbeliever. I remember going to Sunday school during my grade school years and hearing stories from the bible that seemed unbelievable, especially the Noah's ark tale. It was astonishing to me that God was so angry with humanity that he would vengefully cover the Earth with so much water that almost every person and animal would drown. I even wondered what happened to all that water once the flood ended. If it covered the whole Earth, where else could it go? Down the drain?

So little by little, I started questioning (to myself) these tales, and then started questioning the concept of God. I even surmised back then that God was a lot like Santa: He sees you when you're sleeping, he rewards you if



Lauryn Seering photo

PJ Slinger

you're good and punishes you if you're bad. And everybody loves him and he loves everybody. However, once I realized Santa wasn't real, it was no leap of (non)faith to believe God wasn't either. By the time I was in high school I was a full-fledged atheist, although I never thought of myself as that. I just didn't believe.

As for the journalistic chops I bring to FFRF, I have been in the newspaper business almost my entire life since I was 13, save for a few months here and there when I was out sowing my wild oats, such as following the Grateful

Dead around the country.

Growing up in Green Bay, Wis. (Go Packers!), my first job was as a paperboy for the Milwaukee Sentinel, where I had to haul my sorry butt out of bed before junior high school and get those papers delivered. In high school, on a whim, I joined the school newspaper staff as a sportswriter, where I learned the basics of writing and editing. From there, I attended college at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and I joined the staff of the Daily Cardinal, the daily student newspaper. After getting my journalism degree and working at several odd jobs between graduation and a "real" job, I found (barely) gainful employment at the Marshall, Minn., Independent as a sportswriter, where I started out at a whopping \$6 an hour. It's there where I met my wife-to-be. I was smitten, and she could hardly resist the allure of the financial windfall that being married to a young journalist would provide.

From there I moved to Mankato, Minn., where I worked at the Free Press, holding various titles, from sportswriter to obits writer to copy editor to city beat writer.

After eight years in Mankato, we moved to Madison, Wis. The "we" now included our three children. The older two are now in college and the young-

est is in high school.

I was hired as a copy editor at The Capital Times, Madison's daily progressive newspaper, but held several titles there, including online editor, photo editor and data editor.

About two years ago I interviewed FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor for a Q&A feature for the Cap Times, and we got to talking after the interview. I had expressed my appreciation for what FFRF does and mentioned something about how it would be nice to work there. When it was announced publicly in mid-2015 that I was taking a buyout opportunity at the newspaper, Annie Laurie contacted me about the Freethought Today editor position that would be vacant by the end of the year. It was a match made in atheist heaven (whatever that is).

So, after 15 years, I said goodbye to the Cap Times and hello to FFRF. I look forward to hearing from many of you and helping to find and publish what matters to us in the world of freethought, and, of course, state/church violations. Unfortunately, there's no shortage of those. In a perfect world, there would be no need for FFRF, but as we all know, our world is far from perfect. I'm proud to be a member and happy to be your Freethought Today editor.



Owen it all to biology and love

Owen David Markert was born to FFRF Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert at 3:06 p.m. on Bill of Rights Day (Dec. 15) without an epidural, which didn't have time to kick in. Owen weighed 7 pounds, 1 ounce and measured 20 inches. Also pictured are the proud father, Mike Markert, and their two other children, Dexter, 4, and Audrey, 2.

FFRF welcomes 50 special members

The Freedom From Religion Foundation gratefully announces two new "After-Life Members," Len Eisenberg and Karen Eisenberg, and 48 new Lifetime Members. They are:

Frederic M. Alper, Gary Boone, Wally Borgeson, Joseph Bradway, Sam Cardea, Roger Chapman, George Shackelford Daly, Jr., Jeremy Ertl, Carol Fischer (her husband Bob is already a Lifer), Dr. Ed Fisher, Alan E. Gaus, Brett Alan Greig, Vicky Hagens, Merrit Heminway, Ryan Herz, Bruce Hoffmann, John Howieson, M.D., Dr. Steven Jacobson, George M. Jenks, Peter R. Killeen, Steve Knell, Walter E. Lander, Dr. Leonard Linde, Michael Marquez, David A. Nash, David O'Brien, Shawn O'Reilly, Jeanne L. Oliver, William Parker, C.D. Patterson, M.D., Robert Pechar, Jack N. Peterson, M.D., Janet Prim, John G. Pusey, Vern Richards, Matt Runde, Charles Silver, James F. Smith, Sarah Smith-Brady (a gift from her husband William Brady, also a "Lifer"), Paul Smolen, Michael Speyer, Julia Stasch, Joseph C. Stefan and his wife Catherine M. Steffan, Dylan Michael Taylor, Sandra Van de Kauter, Jana Wagner and Frederick G. Wyngarden.

States represented are Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Delaware, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, Mississippi, North Carolina, New Hampshire, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin.

An Individual Lifetime Membership is \$1,000 designated for membership or renewal, and After-Life, slightly tongue in cheek, is \$5,000 for those who want their membership to "live after" them. All dues and donations are deductible for income-tax purposes. Lifetime and After-Life Memberships guarantee never another renewal notice, and go into a reserved "rainy day" account. Lifetime Members receive a card and pin, and After-Lifers a card and certificate. Many Lifetime Members join via matching grants, Combined Federal Campaign gifts (be sure to contact us directly), or over time. Please explicitly designate each installment as for Lifetime Membership.

Our warmest gratitude to Karen and Len and our generous 48 newest Lifetime members.

Freethought Today
published by Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.
info@ffrf.org • FFRF.org
P.O. Box 750 • Madison WI 53701
(608)256-8900 • FAX (608)204-0422
Editor: PJ Slinger, *fttoday@ffrf.org*
Assistant Editor: Bill Dunn
Production Editor: Jake Swenson
Executive Editor: Annie Laurie Gaylor
Contributors:
Philip Appleman, Dan Barker, Steven Belstra, Eryn Johnson,
C. Boyd Pfeiffer, Ron Reagan, Lauryn Seering,
Andrew Seidel, Terry Sunday, Maddy Ziegler
January / February 2016 | *The only freethought newspaper in the United States*

A Note to Members

Your address label shows the expiration date of your membership in FFRF, which includes your subscription to Freethought Today and "Private Line." If it says February or earlier please renew! Your prompt renewal (\$40-single membership; \$50-household; \$100 gung-ho; \$250-sustaining) saves us time and postage, and is tax-deductible. Freethought Today is published 10 times a year, with combined issues in January/February and June/July.

Send membership or renewal to:
FFRF • P.O. Box 750 • Madison, WI 53701
ffrf.org/donate

Notify Us of Your ADDRESS CHANGE Promptly!

EMAIL info@FFRF.org

Don't miss a single issue! If you move, notify us directly and promptly. **The Post Office does not forward third-class mail.** FFRF cannot be responsible for replacing back issues if we have not been notified prior to your move. Back issues, while they last, may be ordered for \$2 each.

Before I’m gone to Golden Pond . . .

Bill Dunn

The higher-ups insist that I write something about stepping down as editor, even though I’m more of a word processor than a writer. Annie Laurie claims I have a distinctive voice. “Otherwise, they’ll think you absconded.” Dan agrees, after a fashion, that “His bark is worse than his bite.”

In the beginning, the genesis of all this, was a dozen or 15 years ago when Annie Laurie wrote a letter on my family’s behalf to the school district. My daughter’s middle school teacher had handed back tests while commenting (paraphrase), “Don’t worry if you didn’t do that well. There’s only been one perfect person in the history of the world and he died on the cross.”

Faster than you can say “no one died for Kaitlin’s sins,” the principal wrote back that he’d told the teacher to keep her religious beliefs to herself in school. That’s when I became a true believer in FFRF’s efficacy.

I needn’t remind you how badly



outnumbered this “little organization that could” is, but will anyway. We have fewer than 20 staffers. One example from the other side of the state-church divide is the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, also based in Madison, Wis. Evangelical and interdenominational, InterVarsity boasts that it has 1,137 staff members and 985 chapters on 649 U.S. college campuses. Income last year was \$102 million.

That’s just one of hundreds of religious advocacy/legal groups (and how many tens of thousands of places of worship?) blanketing America with myth and superstition. Bonus stats: The Fellowship of Christian Athletes, with 1,200 ministry personnel, had a presence in 2013 on 9,000 school campuses, including junior high and youth

sports levels. The Child Evangelism Fellowship oversees more than 3,000 Christian Good News Clubs in public elementary schools. How about they keep their good news to themselves for a change?

The claim about Christians being persecuted in the U.S. is pitiful and laughable. Muslims are also starting to get a foothold in public buildings, with space set aside for their seemingly incessant daily prayer. *WhyIslam.org*: “If a woman is sure that no non-Mahram (marriageable man) will enter the place where she prays, then there will be no wrong in praying without wearing socks.” Not to mention (sorry, I am) that courts claim Jewish ritual enclosures called *eruvim* are secular in nature and thus permissible in public

spaces. FFRF and like-minded groups need freethinkers’ activism and support to level the playing field as best we can in the face of overwhelming odds, but we’re slowly gaining. Slow and steady wins the race.

I can’t say enough good about FFRF’s many steadfast supporters, who pay the freight and have provided us with this beautiful new building in which to ply our trade. The pleasure is all ours. And to my fellow tradeswomen and men, you’re a total hoot and so astute!

My first Social Security contribution (\$193 for the year) was in 1966. Fifty years seems like long enough of the daily grind. Sleep in on Sundays *and* Mondays. From here on in, only dog is my co-pilot.

What follows are a few things plucked from the archives to fill up the rest of the page. Annie Laurie likes white space; I’d rather make use of it (smiley face).

— Bill Dunn



January 2010

In her Meet a Member, Lisa Anne Auerbach, Los Angeles, said, “I have been using many of Barbara G. Walker’s knitting books for years, but it was only recently that I discovered that she was also the author of several books about feminism and mythology, as well as being a contributor to Freethought Today. As a knitter, I’m completely floored and impressed by her exacting patterns and the way she can break down a design into a series of abbreviations. As an atheist, I’m intrigued by her take on the godless rituals that have been co-opted by contemporary religions.”



November 2012

California member Linda Riggle Davis is celebrating the entry of Oklahoma Sam in the 2013 Guinness World Records (on page 61) as “Tallest Living Donkey.” Sam, 4, is 15.3 hands, almost twice the height of the average donkey. “We’ve both been atheists our whole lives,” Linda says. Go ahead and bray for them, anyway!



July 2011

FFRF member Ray Bradley (right) of the Central North Carolina Atheists and Humanists debaptizes Greydon Square at the Rapture After Party in Fayetteville. “I’d like to thank FFRF for the idea and material for our ceremony,” said Bradley. Square, a rap musician and atheist, performed the next day at the group’s RAPture RAP-Up. The fun was covered by the Fayetteville Observer, with CNCAH President Geri Weaver’s comment, “It can be very daunting to stand up and say ‘I don’t believe’ here in the bible belt. Hopefully, events like this will help raise awareness that nonbelievers are just like other people. We don’t cook babies. We aren’t trying to destroy America.”



June 2012

Patricia Jones, a native Michigander, shows which side she is on at her home on a plateau in middle Tennessee. “I never thought I’d be living in the South. But in one year’s time, I’ve actually met more atheists in ‘bible belt’ Tennessee than I ever did in the North.”



March 2011

Fr. Stephen Uhl (back, second from left), in Bradford, Ind., on the day he celebrated his first Mass. Ordained in 1956, he was a Catholic priest for 11 years. Now a major FFRF benefactor with his lovely wife Diane, Steve hangs out with heathens. For all you do, this one’s for you, Steve!

April 2011

Correction: Cenk Uygur’s Emperor Has No Clothes Award acceptance speech [March 11] should have stated that Jacob, not Abraham, “had sex with his wife, her sister, his maid and his sister’s maid.” The bible recounts that Jacob was married simultaneously to Leah and Rachel and that he had 12 sons (the eventual 12 tribes of Israel) and at least one daughter with them and their maidservants, Bilhah and Zilpah, whom he also married.

Thanks to Henry Steinberger, Wisconsin, for pointing this out.

December 2013 crank mail

NEWTOWN, CONNETICUT: Aren’t you glad there is a HELL where this mass murderer of innocent, young children is already receiving his just punishment? Aren’t you glad that there is a Heaven where these young children are now in Glory with God? Aren’t you glad that there is a Heaven where these grieving parents will someday be with their children? When you die, will you be with the mass murderer or will you be with these children? — *Only Believe*, Lexington, Ky.

August 2011: How it came to pass that Beer beats Jesus

The “Top Ten Reasons Why Beer Is Better than Jesus” is a golden oldie, but from whence did it stem? With help from “the Google,” we found Paul D. Jones credited.

In a 1999 letter to Positive Atheism magazine, which had printed “Beer vs. Jesus,” Jones wrote about the list’s genesis. The magazine had said “source unknown.”

But, Jones wrote, “unknown would be myself. Rather, I had the idea, and about half of the reasons are from my original list on a [bulletin board] called EvilAntiForum at Texas A&M, sometime in ’90 or ’91. I had just seen a T-shirt with the ‘Top Ten Reasons Why Jesus Is Better Than Beer’ list [No. 4: If you go around saying “Beer loves you,” people will think you’re an idiot, an alcoholic or both”], so I rebutted. After some discussion and revision, the list was made into a T-shirt, which had two printing runs.

“Humorously, the first printer we picked out of the phone book had religious tees all over the walls when we went there. We found another.”

Another website credits Steve Berry of Texas A&M’s agnostic and atheist student group. The list:

10. No one will kill you for not drinking Beer.
9. Beer doesn’t tell you how to have sex.
8. Beer has never caused a major war.
7. They don’t force Beer on minors who can’t think for themselves.
6. When you have a Beer, you don’t knock on people’s doors trying to give it away.
5. Nobody’s ever been burned at the stake, hanged or tortured over his brand of Beer.
4. You don’t have to wait 2,000+ years for a second Beer.
3. There are laws saying Beer labels can’t lie to you.
2. You can prove you have a Beer.
1. If you’ve devoted your life to Beer, there are groups to help you stop.

Heads Up

A Poetry Column by Philip Appleman

New Year’s Resolution

Well, I did it again, bringing in
that infant Purity across the land,
welcoming Innocence with gin
in New York, waiting up
to help Chicago,
Denver, L.A., Fairbanks, Hon-
olulu—and now
the high school bands are alienating Dallas,
and girls in gold and tangerine
have lost all touch with Pasadena,
and young men with muscles and missing teeth
are dreaming of personal fouls,
and it’s all beginning again, just like
those other Januaries in
instant replay.

But I’ve had enough
of turning to look back, the old
post-morteming of defeat:
people I loved but didn’t touch,
friends I haven’t seen for years,
strangers who smiled but didn’t speak—failures,
failures. No,
I refuse to leave it at that, because
somewhere, off camera,
January is coming like Venus
up from the murk of December, re-
virginized, as innocent
of loss as any dawn. Resolved: this year
I’m going to break my losing streak,
I’m going to stay alert, reach out,
speak when not spoken to,
read the minds of people in the streets.
I’m going to practice every day,
stay in training, and be moderate
in all things.
All things but love.

© Philip Appleman.

From the book *New and Selected Poems, 1956–1996*.

Philip Appleman is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Indiana University. His published volumes of poetry include *Perfidious Prov-
erbs and Other Poems: A Satirical Look at the Bible* (2012), *Dar-
win’s Ark* (new 2009 edition) and *Karma, Dharma, Pudding & Pie*
(2009). His nonfiction work includes the widely used *Norton Critical
Edition, Darwin*, and the *Norton Critical Edition of Malthus’ Essay
on Population*. His newest book is *The Labyrinth: God, Darwin and
the Meaning of Life*. His poetry and fiction have won many awards,
including a fellowship in poetry from the National Endowment for
the Arts, the Castagnola Award from the Poetry Society of America,
the Humanist Arts Award from the American Humanist Association and the Friend of
Darwin Award from the National Center for Science Education. His work has appeared in
Harper’s Magazine, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Times*, *The Paris
Review*, *Partisan Review*, *Poetry*, and *The Yale Review*.

He and his playwright wife, Marjorie Appleman, are both “After-Life” Members of the
Freedom From Religion Foundation. Phil’s books: ffrf.org/shop.



They said what?

To tell you the truth, there is no place
for that [religious neutrality] in our
constitutional tradition. Where did that
come from? To be sure, you can’t favor
one denomination over another, but
can’t favor religion over non-religion?
... I think one of the reasons God has
been good to us is that we have done
him honor. Unlike the other countries
of the world that do not even invoke
his name, we do him honor.
**Conservative Supreme Court Justice
Antonin Scalia, speaking to students at
a Catholic high school in Louisiana**
Associated Press, 1-2-16

New Atheism ridicules the “irrationali-
ty of faith.” But it’s in decline, because
it’s stale, dull and incredible. It pro-
vides unsatisfactory answers to ultimate
questions. People want to know more.
**Alister McGrath, professor of science
and religion at the University of Ox-
ford, during the annual Parchman
Lectures at Baylor University’s Truett
Theological Seminary**
Christian Today, 11-24-15

The erroneous wall-of-separation doc-
trine narrows the role of religion in
public discourse, fueling the view that
religion is a private matter rather than
a fundamental precept of American
civil society and leading many to fall
prey to the disturbing claim that reli-
gious freedom doesn’t extend much
further than the church door.
**Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, op-ed, “The
wall separating faith and public life
must be torn down”**
Washington Times, 11-29-15

He says that as long as he believes he
will be saved, he can do whatever he
pleases. He is obsessed with the world
coming to an end. ... He believed he
was doing God’s will.
**Barbara Mischeau, ex-wife of Rob-
ert Dear, charged with killing three
and injuring nine others in an attack
at Planned Parenthood in Colorado
Springs on Nov. 27**
The New York Times, 12-2-15

Violence is never the answer but we
must start pointing out who is the real
culprit. The true instigator of this vio-
lence and all violence at any pph facili-
ty, is pph themselves.
**Colorado State Rep. JoAnn Windholz,
Facebook post blaming Planned Par-
enthood for the shooting deaths of
three people in Colorado Springs**
Colorado Independent, 12-1-15

If you can kill a disbelieving American
or European — especially the spiteful

and filthy French — or an Australian,
or a Canadian, then rely upon Allah
and kill him in any manner or way how-
ever it may be.
**Abu Mohammed Al-Adnani, official
spokesman for the Islamic State, call-
ing on Muslims in the West to murder
those around them**
The New York Times, 11-29-15

[We need] a total and complete shut-
down of Muslims entering the United
States until our country’s representa-
tives can figure out what’s going on.
**Republican presidential front-runner
Donald Trump, which led to Al-Shabab,
al-Qaida’s East Africa affiliate, to use a
clip of this statement in a 51-minute re-
cruitment video for jihad, released on
Jan. 1.**
Associated Press, 12-7-15

They flout the state liquor laws, and
they live a libertine lifestyle that is not
allowed on campus.
**Duquesne University President Charles
Dougherty, on students living off-cam-
pus rather than in the Catholic univer-
sity’s residence halls**
Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, 10-25-15

If one more person says “Happy Holi-
days” to me I might just slap them. Ei-
ther tell me “Merry Christmas” or just
don’t say anything.
**Texas Agriculture Commissioner Sid
Miller**
twitter.com, 12-17-15

Anybody who is, in any way, sympa-
thetic to what’s going on today [with]
Muslims terrorists, who would crucify
children and behead women and stop
at nothing to try to destroy us and Israel
and our allies, I’d choose an atheist
over that!
**Former vice presidential candidate
Sarah Palin, asked by reporter Michael
Smerconish if she would ever vote for
an atheist**
CNN, 12-19-15

We actually went outside and started
commanding the winds because God
had given us authority over the winds
— the airways. And we just began to
command this storm not to hit our
area. We — we spoke to the storm and
said, go to unpopulated places. It did
exactly what we said to do because God
gave us the authority to do that.
**Sabrina Lowe, Texas resident, saying
she willed a tornado away from her
during a string of tornadoes that killed
11 people on Dec. 26**
NPR, 12-28-15

Include FFRF In Your Estate Planning

Arrange a bequest in your will or trust, or make the Freedom From
Religion Foundation the beneficiary of an insurance policy, bank account,
or IRA. It’s easy to do. For related information (or to request a bequest
brochure), please phone Annie Laurie Gaylor at (608) 256-8900.

FFRF • P.O. Box 750 • Madison, WI 53701

Freedom Depends on Freethinkers

Tennessee police department told to end ‘Adopt a Cop’ program

A Tennessee police department has been told by FFRF that it needs to discontinue its new “Adopt a Cop” program because of its religious nature.

The Johnson City Police Department (JCPD) program entails praying on a daily basis for the officer for his/her safety, emotional strength, health, wisdom, financial stability and strength of character.

Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel sent a letter of complaint to JCPD Chief Mark Sirois. “It is not appropriate for the JCPD to do so through a religious program that is not actually providing any protection for your officers, but only wishing for it in the form of Christian prayers,” Seidel writes in the letter. “JCPD should focus on programs that actually make a difference in police officer’s lives rather than expending any department resources for ineffectual Christian programming.”

The Johnson City “Adopt a Cop” program is based off a national program started in California by the International Transformation Network, which “want(s) to see the presence and power of God meet the felt needs and the systemic challenges of our communities.”



In Johnson City, the program is organized by Becky Haas, director of the Targeted Community Crime Reduction Project and JCPD Chaplain Eileen Zoellner.

“JCPD’s chaplaincy program is also problematic,” Seidel writes. “The employment of chaplains, even if volunteer, demonstrates government endorsement of religion, which is a violation of both the federal and Tennessee constitutions.”

‘Religious’ hospitals not exempt from retirement regulations

The Third Circuit Court of Appeals ruled Dec. 29 that large healthcare companies are not exempt from retirement plan regulations, even if they operate “religious” hospitals.

The Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) regulates retirement plans, but exempts church plans from requirements such as paying insurance premiums, meeting minimum funding standards and disclosing funding levels to plan participants.

FFRF filed an amicus brief in 2015 in the lawsuit contending that hospitals are not entitled to church privileges.

New Jersey’s Saint Peter’s Healthcare System employees filed class-action suits against their employers for claiming the church plan exemption. These large non-profit hospital systems

have been able to contravene ERISA and underfund employees’ retirement plans by claiming the church exemption. The plaintiffs argued the employers are not churches, and are not operated or funded by religious organizations, so their employers should not be able to claim the exemption.

The district court ruled that Saint Peter’s could not use the exemption and the Third Circuit has agreed: “The plain terms of ERISA only make these exemptions available to plans established in the first instance by churches. Because St. Peter’s is not a church, the exemption is unavailable.”

FFRF briefs called the “church plan exemption” itself unconstitutional under the First Amendment because it treats churches preferentially.



This screenshot from the Wisconsin Assembly GOP YouTube channel shows Rep. Scott Allen speaking to constituents about Christmas and tells non-Christians to “consider the hope offered by the prince of peace.”

Legislator steps over line with Christmas video

Imagine a Muslim state legislator sending out over his official state email a Muslim message to constituents, that not only presumes his viewers share his beliefs, but which invites non-Muslim viewers to convert to his religion.

Imagine, too, that this video has been recorded using a backdrop of the state Capitol, using state equipment and studio time. His message says, in part: “Merry Ramadan. To me and my fellow Muslims, celebrating the season of Ramadan, well, it is one of the most important celebrations of the year. For those who may watch this who are not Muslims, I invite you to consider the hope offered by Muhammad.”

Then this legislative video cites Koranic passages that indicate you may be destroyed if you don’t believe, but if you believe you may be saved.

Now, imagine the uproar.

We don’t have to imagine a Christian legislator making such a state-supported pitch to his religion — because this is precisely what Wisconsin State Rep. Scott Allen, R-Waukesha, has done. “For those who may watch who

are not Christian, I invite you to consider the hope offered by the prince of peace,” he states in the video.

FFRF complained to Assembly Speaker Robin Vos about this egregious misuse of the machinery of the state — not only to promulgate a legislator’s personal beliefs, but to divisively attempt to convert constituents of minority or no religious beliefs.

Vos claims it’s making a “mountain out of a molehill.” But we know if the case involved a Muslim legislator, a Wiccan or an atheist legislator going overboard, Christian legislators and their constituents would be crying foul.

It’s so simple. The government may not take sides on matters of religion. Our government is supposed to be neutral, and leave the practice of religion to private citizens. There is no country where religion flourishes more, and that is because of our First Amendment’s Establishment Clause, which, as Jefferson noted, erects “a wall of separation between church and state.”



On the run

On the one-year anniversary of the heinous murders of 12 people at the Charlie Hebdo offices in Paris, the French satirical magazine came out with this cover illustration on Jan. 7. The headline, translated, reads: “One year after: The assassin is still out there.” “It is a caricature representing the symbolic figure of God,” Laurent Sourisseau, Charlie Hebdo’s head of publication, told CNN. “To us, it’s the very idea of God that may have killed our friends a year ago. So we wanted to widen our vision of things. Faith is not always peaceful. Maybe we should learn to live with a little less of God.”

NYC ripped for ‘misappropriation’

On Jan. 6, FFRF protested the allocation of nearly \$20 million per year in taxpayer money to private schools, including religious parochial schools, in New York City. Mayor Bill de Blasio signed the bill into law Jan. 5. The money is designated for hiring security.

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor objected to the “misappropriation” of taxpayer funds in a letter to de Blasio. “This action will finance religion with millions of taxpayer dollars,” she said. “This is not in the best interests of all New York City citizens.”

“The NYPD is already tasked with protecting students who attend private schools. If the city sees a need for increased protection, the funds should go to the NYPD, which would then decide how best to use those resources,” FFRF notes.

The letter quotes New York City Councilman Daniel Dromm, who said that the religious schools receiving



Bill de Blasio

these funds may “embrace homophobia, transphobia, and other horrific ideologies, and subject our young people to them on a daily basis in the classroom.” FFRF’s letter points out that a city must ensure its funds are not used for discriminatory hiring, and “a prohibition against allowing private schools to discriminate on the basis of religion, gender, or sexual orientation would be an impermissible government entanglement with religion.”

“This is the fourth time we have written to you in less than a year regarding the promotion of religion while acting in your official capacity as the mayor of New York City,” Gaylor wrote. Among FFRF’s recent concerns: the city’s ticket giveaway for an appearance by Pope Francis in Central Park in September and a “Mayor’s Clergy Advisory Council” in August.

“We are dismayed at the erosion of respect for the wall of separation between state and church by your office. In our pluralistic modern society, increasingly tolerant and irreligious, public funds should not be given to private, often dogmatically intolerant, religious institutions,” concluded Gaylor.

Injunction won

Continued from front page

in our public schools. Religion in school creates walls between children, accentuates differences, turns believers into favored “insiders” and nonbelievers or minority believers into favored “outsiders” (precisely the way the majority is acting in Elkhart).

“Instead of figuring out new and creative ways to violate the Constitution, the Concord Community School District should be honoring the student and student’s family for standing up for the First Amend-

ment,” said FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “It protects us all.”

Concord Community School District officials have dug their hole even deeper with this contemptuous move, and strengthened FFRF’s case through their hubris. While we know reason and the law will prevail, district officials deserve the strongest rebukes for their callous manipulation, FFRF contends.

FFRF and the ACLU are moving forward with their challenge to the nativity scene enactment and hope to have a final ruling from the district court before the 2016 performance.

‘Resurrection’ fund created for FFRF signs

After several FFRF Winter Solstice banners and signs had been stolen or vandalized, it was time to say “enough is enough.”

Such vandalism has occurred for years with no consequence for the vandals. So why let criminals censor free-thought messages and violate our right to free speech?

So Staff Attorney Sam Grover came up with a great idea to discourage crimes: create a pledge fund for when this happens again so the banners and displays can be “resurrected” in a timely manner and the vandals/thieves will actually be helping FFRF’s cause.

FFRF went to social media and asked our supporters to help protect our Winter Solstice displays throughout the country by making a pledge to the Resurrection Pledge Drive. People may pledge any amount they want, but would pay only if any of FFRF’s displays are stolen or destroyed.

In early December, FFRF’s Winter Solstice banner was stolen from the Franklin County, Ind., courthouse lawn. A new, identical Winter Solstice banner was erected there on Dec. 19.

In the inaugural year of the Resurrection Pledge Drive, 95 freethinkers answered the call, pledging a total of \$889 for each FFRF display that was stolen or vandalized. For the vast majority of our displays, this new level of protection worked!

Unfortunately, three displays were harmed after we kicked off the pledge drive. First, FFRF erected a Winter Solstice banner on the front lawn of the Belle Plaine, Minn., police station on Dec. 18, next to a privately sponsored nativity scene. In less than 24 hours, our banner was stolen.

Second, on Christmas Eve, the new Franklin County banner was slashed to bits in a clear act of aggression. The second banner included a warning that “dozens of generous freethinkers have pledged money to FFRF in the event that this banner is stolen or destroyed.” Though the second banner was shredded, FFRF’s efforts have convinced the town of Brookville to move its nativity scene to private property next December and Franklin County is considering closing the forum on its courthouse lawn.

Third, FFRF’s local chapter in Maine put up a Winter Solstice banner in a public park in Sanford. The Sanford banner was stolen on Dec. 30, less than one week after it had been put up.

For all three of these banners, FFRF called on those who pledged to send in their contributions to ensure that FFRF could replace these displays for the 2016 holiday season.

If you want to join in the effort to protect FFRF’s freethought displays, then join FFRF’s 2016 Resurrection Pledge Campaign. With your help we can ensure that thieves and vandals cannot censor FFRF’s freethought message without triggering a donation that will fund even more FFRF displays.



Pieces on Earth?
FFRF’s Winter Solstice sign on the Franklin County Courthouse lawn was cut to pieces by a vandal on Dec. 24. The first such sign was stolen.

FFRF has banner year

A total of 16 sites were home to FFRF Winter Solstice signs and Bill of Rights “nativity” displays in 2015.

FFRF offers seasonal displays and banners, including “Keep Saturn in Saturnalia,” (a riff on “Keep Christ in Christmas”) to counter religious displays on public property.

Here are the locations that hosted signs or diplays in 2015:

1. Springfield, Ill. Capitol (“May Reason Prevail” sign with easel)
2. Austin, Texas Capitol (Sign removed after Gov. Abbott complained. See cover story)
3. Olympia, Wash. Capitol (“Let Reason Prevail” banner)
4. Madison, Wis., Capitol (“May Reason Prevail” with easel, Bill of Rights nativity)
5. Arlington Heights, Ill. (Scarlet “A”)
6. Daley Plaza, Ill. (“Happy Winter Solstice,” Bill of Rights banner and large scarlet “A”)
7. Grundy County, Ill. (Bill of Rights nativity)
8. Franklin County, Ind. (“Happy Winter Solstice” sign stolen and replaced), then defaced.
9. South Bend/St. Joseph County, Ind. (Bill of Rights nativity)
10. Bulloch County, Ga. (Bill of Rights nativity)
11. Sanford, Maine (Stolen)
12. Warren/Macomb County, Mich. (“Keep Saturn in Saturnalia”)
13. Belle Plaine, Minn., Police Department (Stolen)
14. Hastings on Hudson, N.Y. (“Reason’s Greetings” banner)
15. Manassas, Va. (“Let Reason Prevail” banner)
16. Milwaukee County Courthouse (“May Reason Prevail” sandwich board)



Bully pulpit
“Every now and then I go by and see a religious message posted here,” writes Tom Yocom about this Lincoln, Ill., business. “It always appears to me to be a public illustration of a ‘lot of bull.’”

Texas sheriff places cross stickers on vehicles

FFRF is calling out the Brewster County Sheriff’s Office in Texas for its plan to promote Christianity on its patrol vehicles.

Sheriff Ronny Dodson announced his intention to place white crosses on all deputy vehicles.

“It is inappropriate and unconstitutional for a government entity to display a Latin cross on its property because it conveys a preference by the Sheriff’s Office — and by extension, Brewster County — for religion over nonreligion and Christianity over all minority faiths,” explained Staff Attorney Sam Grover in his complaint letter to the sheriff. “When a sheriff mandates the display of a symbol from his preferred religion on county property, not only does he unconstitutionally endorse religion, but also risks alienating the nearly 30% of Americans who are non-Christian.”

FFRF calls on Dodson to abandon his plan for the religious decals. Dodson is quoted on the sheriff office’s Facebook page as justifying the crosses because “he wanted God’s protection over his deputies.”

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, who is proving to be no friend of the separation of state and church (see cover story), backed the sheriff’s decision.

“The Constitution demands respect for religious expression rather than hostility toward it and Governor Abbott fully supports Sheriff Dodson’s decision to allow his deputies to display the cross on their patrol vehicles,” Abbott spokesman John Wittman told MySanAntonio.com.

“We share Sheriff Dodson’s concerns for officer safety,” noted FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor, “but training, planning, and community relations efforts are far more effective than appealing to an imaginary man in the sky.”

Bus driver tells autistic 5-year-old she will go to hell

FFRF sent a letter to the Juniata County School District in Pennsylvania to strongly protest the conduct of a proselytizing bus driver.

A parent reported to FFRF that a bus driver in the Mifflintown, Pa., school district targeted her 5-year-old autistic child for religious indoctrination. The driver reportedly told the child that if she doesn’t believe in God, she will go to hell, describing hell as a place where “fireballs” will be shot at her. She also told the child that her parents needed to ask Jesus’s forgiveness or they would go to hell, and that it was “bad” that her parents did not have a bible.

Indoctrinating any 5-year-old child, but particularly one with a known disability, is “predatory and an outrageous abuse of her position,” charged Staff Attorney Elizabeth Cavell in the Dec. 14 letter. “The Supreme Court has stressed the importance of protecting students from religious promotion by public school districts.”

The parent reported the matter to the district directly, and was told by the transportation director that the driver would be immediately reassigned to another bus while the district investigated. “We commend the district for responding promptly,” wrote Cavell. “However, we write to underscore the seriousness of this violation and to seek more specific assurances of the district’s action.”

Cavell noted that the driver’s actions “have caused serious trauma for this young student,” who was uniquely vulnerable because “she is more likely than other children to take these threats literally and fixate on them given the fear they’ve caused.” This conduct would be illegal regardless of the child targeted, however, Cavell pointed out.

The letter requests “immediate corrective action,” including a reprimand or dismissal of the driver. The proselytizing is “a severe betrayal of parental trust that warrants a formal apology from the district,” Cavell concluded.

Coaches haven’t got a prayer against FFRF

Maybe, just maybe, public school football programs are beginning to understand that it’s not OK to have a coach involved in pregame or post-game prayers with students.

FFRF has led the way in getting many high school football coaches around the country to stop participating in any form of prayer with their respective teams during games, practices or other coaching times.

The issue came to national attention in October 2015 when Joseph Kennedy, a high school football coach in Bremerton, Wash., was told to stop praying after games at the 50-yard-line, where many players would join him. But Kennedy did not stop, so the district put him on administrative leave. FFRF has backed the Bremerton School District’s decision.

Since then, several other districts around the county have made sure their coaches no longer are involved in any religious rituals during their time as coach or teacher, thanks to FFRF.

In 2015, FFRF sent out 39 letters to dozens of school districts complaining about coaches involved in prayers. So far, 15 of those have resulted in the preferred outcome of coaches not being allowed to participate in any form of prayer with students.

• • •

After getting a letter of complaint from FFRF, coaches for the Tarkington High School football team in Cleveland, Texas, will no longer lead students in

[We are] aware that a coach led prayer is not appropriate. The head football coach has been instructed that neither he nor his staff may lead his players in prayer.

— *Naperville Superintendent Dan Bridges*

prayer. Staff Attorney Sam Grover wrote to the school district on Dec. 1 to object to the practice. “The Fifth Circuit, the controlling Court of Appeals in Texas, has specifically held that coach involvement in prayer at practices and games is unconstitutional because the prayers “take place during school-controlled, curriculum-related activities that members of the [athletic] team are required to attend,” wrote Grover.

Tarkington Independent School District Superintendent Kevin Weldon told Grover on Dec. 8 that the district had addressed the matter with its staff to ensure that the district acts in accordance with the law.

• • •

Also in Texas, after FFRF complained twice about instances of coached prayer in the Weslaco Independent School District, the district has finally taken steps to correct the problem.

Grover wrote letters on Sept. 17 and Dec. 7 objecting to coach-led prayers at

football games in September and November. In each instance, a coach took both teams to the middle of the field and led them in prayer.

“We ask that Weslaco ISD commence an immediate investigation into this situation and ensure that its representatives are not organizing, leading, or participating in prayer with students,” Grover wrote.

On Dec. 31, FFRF received a response from an attorney for the school district. “The District has counseled its staff on these matters and expects compliance with the law in all respects moving forward,” the letter said.

• • •

And earlier in December, a northern Illinois school district agreed to stop allowing a high school football coach from leading prayers with players at games after a local resident complained to FFRF that Naperville Central High School head football coach Mark Stine prayed with students during games.

On Dec. 8, Legal Fellow Ryan Jayne sent a letter to Naperville Superintendent Dan Bridges, who responded two days later.

“Naperville Community Unit School District 203 is aware that a coach led prayer is not appropriate,” he wrote. “The head football coach has been instructed that neither he nor his staff may lead his players in prayer.”

• • •

And in November, FFRF sent a letter protesting a praying football coach and other inappropriate religiosity in Florida’s Bay District Schools.

Mosley High School head football coach Jeremy Brown “knowingly uses his position to proselytize and preach to students,” charged Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel, citing a recent WJHG-TV report in a letter sent Nov. 24 to Superintendent Bill Husfelt. “Brown mistakenly believes this is merely a matter of not being ‘politically correct,’ when in fact it is a gross violation of students’ rights of conscience.”

For Brown, “the most important thing” about coaching has “got to be sharing Christ with the kids.” Brown believes that he is “in the business of earning crowns and not rings,” referring a passage from the bible that advocates “preach[ing] to others.” He measures success by whether or not “every kid on our football team is saved.”

FFRF has not yet heard back on how the district will handle FFRF’s request for Brown to stop praying with the team.

More legal victories

FFRF stops Louisiana school’s prayer

Students at Mansfield High School in Mansfield, La., are no longer being subjected to prayer each day at mandatory morning assemblies.

FFRF Staff Attorney Sam Grover wrote to the Desoto Parish School System in August 2015 objecting to the school’s practice of selecting a student to lead the prayer, which was projected to all students in the room. Students were also reportedly required to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance.

“The Supreme Court has continually and consistently struck down prayers offered at school-sponsored events, even when led by students,” Grover said. A public school “must not organize a means for students to promote a decidedly religious message to a captive student audience, thereby isolating and excluding those students who are non-Christian or nonreligious.”

On Nov. 19, FFRF’s complainant confirmed that a moment of silence had replaced the prayers, and no students were being forced to stand for the pledge.

FFRF halts Ohio band competition prayer

After a complaint by FFRF, Louisville High School in Ohio will no longer include invocations at its annual marching band competition. The 2015 event reportedly began with a minister leading attendees from seven different Ohio public schools in prayer.

Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert wrote to the Louisville School District on Oct. 21. “Federal courts consistently strike down school-sponsored prayer in public schools because it con-

stitutes a government endorsement of religion, which violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment and interferes with the personal conscience of students,” Markert wrote.

An attorney for the school district informed FFRF on Nov. 24 that the superintendent had reminded “the appropriate parties” of the law on school invocations.

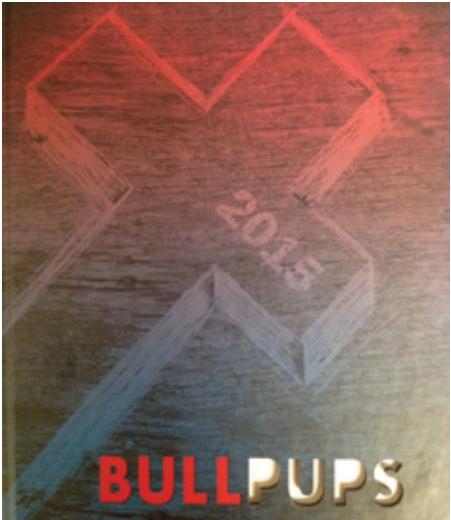
Senior center stops mealtime prayers

Thanks to a series of letters from FFRF, tax-funded senior centers in Maryland have been reminded of their duties to not require prayer for the seniors in their care.

Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel sent letters to three Maryland senior centers about reports of unconstitutional prayers at mealtimes, typically over a PA system. FFRF’s complainant reported feeling as though “kitchen staffers hold our tax-subsidized lunches hostage” until a prayer was said. Seidel also sent letters to the two counties where the three facilities are located, writing to the Baltimore County Department on Aging and the Anne Arundel County Department of Aging and Disabilities. The Maryland Department of Aging also received a letter from FFRF objecting to prayers.

“Government-run or -funded facilities should not host, organize, or facilitate prayers,” wrote Seidel. “Not only does scheduling or permitting public prayer to be imposed on all diners at these meals raise concern that the government is endorsing religion, it also violates citizens’ rights to be free from religious proselytizing.”

FFRF’s complainant confirmed that the pre-meal prayers had stopped.



No more religion in Kansas publications

After receiving a letter from FFRF, Unified School District #436 in Caney Valley, Kan., will ensure that religious material is no longer printed in its yearbooks or newspapers.

Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel wrote a letter of complaint after a student forwarded a picture of the 2014-15 Caney Valley High School yearbook with a single large Christian cross on its cover. FFRF also complained about a section from the school’s newspaper quoting two students and a faculty member selecting their favorite bible verses and recommending Matthew 28:18-20, which is a command to convert “all people in the world” to Christianity.

“School publications, including yearbooks and school newspapers, must remain neutral toward religion,” wrote Seidel. The yearbook cross and newspaper section dedicated to bible verses both create “the appearance that the district prefers religion over nonreligion and Christianity over all other religions.”

New superintendent Blake A. Vargas thanked FFRF for “bringing to light practices that could be consid-

ered a violation of the First Amendment and the Establishment Clause,” and assured FFRF that he would review current practices and ensure that the school would be neutral on religion in the future.

Ohio district ends ties with fundraiser

New Lebanon Local Schools in Ohio will no longer fundraise for the Samaritan’s Purse, a religious organization headed by Franklin Graham.

FFRF learned that Dixie Elementary School in New Lebanon has asked its students to participate in a donation drive for “Operation Christmas Child,” a project of Samaritan’s Purse, for at least three years. The school sent home pamphlets to children explaining, “Operation Christmas Child partners with churches worldwide to reach boys and girls with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. After receiving shoebox gifts, many children are disciplined through our Bible study course, The Greatest Journey, where they learn to become faithful followers of Christ and share their faith with others.” The pamphlet also instructs readers to, “most importantly,” pray for the gift recipient.

“While it is laudable for a public school to encourage young students to become active and involved in their community by volunteering and donating to charitable organizations, the school cannot use that goal as an avenue to fund a religious organization with a religious mission,” wrote Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert in a Nov. 19 letter to the school district.

On Nov. 24, Superintendent Greg Williams notified Markert that the school district’s attorney “has led district administration to conclude that it is not appropriate to continue with this project.”

Continued on next page

FFRF legal victories

Continued from page 7

FFRF stops concert’s religious script

Missouri’s Iberia Elementary School previously planned on including a recitation of the “biblical meaning” of verses in “The Twelve Days of Christmas” at its Christmas program. However, after receiving a letter from Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott, the school changed the script prior to the concert.

The religious script claimed religious meanings for each of the verses in the popular, secular holiday song, including claims that Jesus is the “true love” referenced in the first day, the two turtle doves represent the Old and New Testaments, and the six geese a-laying are “the six days of creation.”

Elliott’s Nov. 10 letter informed the Iberia R-V School District that “having young elementary school students recite the purported ‘biblical meaning’ to a gathering of elementary school students, teachers and parents gives the appearance that the school endorses the religious message.” Moreover, “the content of the script is demonstrably false,” and thus, “if music instruction in the District is meant to educate, the Christmas program script is doing a disservice by spreading false and unsubstantiated claims.”

FFRF’s local complainant reported on Nov. 24 that the program’s script had been changed to a secular version.

Future veteran’s events to exclude prayer

Coleman High School in Coleman, Wis., will not include prayers in future Memorial Day and Veterans Day assemblies after FFRF sent a letter to the superintendent. Ceremonies for the last two years at least have reportedly included religious prayers and videos.

“We ask that you take action to ensure that future assemblies do not include prayer and otherwise remain neutral toward religion,” wrote FFRF Legal Fellow Ryan Jayne in a Nov. 19 letter to Superintendent Douglas P. Polomis.

“We will make every effort to ensure that future assemblies do not include prayer and remain neutral toward religion,” Polomis responded on Nov. 30.



The Carver Post Office in Massachusetts had this poster that had three pledges, including a “Pledge to the Bible” and a “Pledge to the Christian Flag.” FFRF complained in November and the poster has since been removed.

FFRF removes religion from post offices

The Carver, Mass., post office has removed a religious poster from its bulletin board after FFRF pointed out the sign’s illegality. (See photo above.)

The poster was titled “The Pledges,” and in addition to the Pledge of Allegiance, printed a “Pledge to the Bible” and a “Pledge to the Christian Flag.” FFRF Legal Fellow Madeline Ziegler lodged a complaint with the office on July 22, 2015, pointing out that in addition to being unconstitutional, “United States postal regulations prohibit the display of religious materials, other than stamp art, on postal property.”

On Nov. 30, FFRF received word from an interim postmaster that the postmaster to whom the letter was addressed had retired, and the poster on the bulletin board had been removed.

• • •

The Alden Post Office in Michigan has removed religious propaganda from the counter in the lobby following a complaint from FFRF. Proselytizing materials subtitled “Evidence for God’s Existence and Identity” had been regularly available in the lobby.

Legal Fellow Madeline Ziegler wrote to Postmaster Lynnette Derror on Nov. 23, quoting postal regulations providing that no literature other than

official postal materials could be deposited anywhere on postal premises, and regulations prohibiting the display of religious materials.

On Dec. 3, Derror said she had posted Post Office regulations and “will take steps to insure that there is no literature on the counter daily.”

• • •

A painted nativity display was removed and replaced with a secular display in the window of the Rupert Post Office in Idaho after FFRF lodged a complaint. (See photo below.)

Legal Fellow Madeline Ziegler protested the display, which also included the words “Christmas begins with Christ,” in a Dec. 4 letter to the postmaster. “United States postal regulations prohibit the display of religious materials, other than stamp art, on postal property,” Ziegler wrote. Furthermore, “by displaying a nativity scene and religious statement on its grounds, the Rupert Post Office is illegally demonstrating a preference for religion over nonreligion, and Christianity over all other faiths.”

On Dec. 14, FFRF’s complainant reported that the religious scene had been removed, and had been repainted with a display reading “Peace on earth, good will toward men.” (Maybe next year they’ll include women!)

Prayers ended at faculty meetings

After years of prayers “in Jesus’ name” at Missouri’s Montgomery County R-II School District faculty meetings, FFRF has ensured that future meetings will be secular.

Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott called the prayers “unnecessary and divisive,” pointing out that they alienate non-Christian and nonbelieving employees. “Their participation in these mandatory meetings is adversely affected by these types of prayers, which turn them into outsiders in their own community and workplace,” he wrote.

An attorney for the school district wrote on Dec. 2, saying the district had taken measures to comply with the law regarding religious endorsement at district events.

Religious club no longer teacher-led

The Appleton Area School District in Wisconsin is taking steps to ensure that a Christian club is truly student-run.

FFRF learned that Appleton East High School circulated a flyer for a religious student club, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, but listed a teacher’s school email and cell phone number as the contact. “We are writing to ensure that the FCA is entirely student-initiated and student-run, as required by federal law,” wrote Legal Fellow Ryan Jayne in a Dec. 7 letter to the school district. “In our experience, adults often organize and participate in FCA events. If the FCA club is not student-initiated and student-run, AEHS should dissolve it.”

“School and district administration have met with the FCA supervisor and reviewed FCA meeting practices for club operations,” wrote Superintendent Lee Allinger in an emailed reply on Dec. 17. “We also took this opportunity to reinforce legal and district requirements.”

Allinger also stated that the objectionable flyers had been removed and future flyers would not contain supervisor contact information, and thanked FFRF for sharing its concerns.

Evangelists removed from high school

After FFRF sent a complaint, Barnum Public Schools in Minnesota will no longer allow evangelists access to students at school.

Adults affiliated with the evangelical Christian group Campus Life had been permitted to come into the lunchroom weekly to recruit students to come to church events, a Barnum High School student told FFRF. The group states its purpose as to “minister in the name of Jesus.”

“The presence of Campus Life ministers in the school supports their mission of proselytizing,” said Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott in a Dec. 16 letter. “No religious organization should have direct access to students at school. This predatory conduct should raise red flags, especially since these adults are conversing with students without parental knowledge.”

Superintendent David J. Bottem responded promptly on Dec. 18, informing FFRF that the district had severed its relationship with Campus Life, “effective immediately.”



This religious window painting on the Rupert, Idaho, Post Office was removed after FFRF complained, and was repainted with a display reading “Peace on earth, good will toward men.”

FFRF quashes Texas teacher’s prayers

Teacher-led prayers are no longer part of the lunch hour at Alpha Charter School in Garland, Texas, thanks to action taken by the FFRF.

A parent reported their child’s second-grade teacher to FFRF for leading her students in prayer every day before lunch. The school principal had not taken action despite being made aware of the situation.

Public schools “must not promote decidedly religious messages to a captive student audience, thereby isolating and excluding those students who are non-Christian or nonreligious,” Staff Attorney Sam Grover told the school. Grover also pointed to FFRF’s recent successful lawsuit against praying teachers in Emanuel County, Ga., declaring, “FFRF is committed to defending the rights of students in public schools. Given how young and impressionable these students are, this violation of the law is particularly egregious.”

The school responded on Dec. 17, saying that they had investigated the situation and met with the teacher in question, who now “understands her responsibility in regards to separation of church and state.”

FFRF brings equality to prison website

In Pennsylvania, the York County prison system’s website featured a direct link to the website of Good News Jail & Prison Ministry, a Christian organization, despite the fact that several other organizations operate in the prison. However, the county stopped promoting the group on its website after FFRF got involved.

Staff Attorney Sam Grover contended that posting the link solely to one organization “creates the impression that the county impermissibly favors

the ministry’s religious message, which violates the Establishment Clause.”

FFRF’s complainant reported on Dec. 20 that the county had removed the link.

Second set of religious displays removed



After persuading the Frisco Independent School District in Texas to remove a sign reading “Pray more, worry less” from the Roach Middle School front office in September, FFRF has prompted the district to remove further unconstitutional religious displays from district property.

Staff Attorney Sam Grover sent a complaint to the district on Nov. 19 to object to religious displays in the school district’s Student Opportunity Center. One sign read, “The will of God will never take you where the Grace of God will not protect you,” while another proclaimed that “Prayer does not change God – it changes me.” The office also contained two crosses with scriptural quotes on them. “All students deserve to learn in an envi-

ronment free from religious proselytization and endorsement,” Grover wrote.

The district’s attorney informed Grover on Dec. 2 that the displays had been removed, and that all staff had been reminded to ensure there were no religious displays on school grounds.

Police station won’t display nativity again

Next holiday season, the city of Belle Plaine, Minn., will not allow a longstanding nativity scene on public land as it previously had. A local church will display it instead.

Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott and Legal Fellow Ryan Jayne sent the city a letter of complaint on Dec. 15 to protest the nativity display, which the city allowed the Rotary Club to place on the lawn of the police department for at least 60 years. In addition to pointing out the legal issues with the nativity, FFRF requested to put up its own banner if the nativity was not removed. The request was granted, although FFRF’s banner was later stolen.

FFRF’s local complainant reported on Dec. 17 that the Rotary had been told it would have to move the nativity from 2016 onward.

County clerk removes religious poster

A Colorado county clerk has removed an overtly religious poster from the office where citizens, including same-sex couples, get their marriage licenses, following a complaint by FFRF.

The poster was removed the day after FFRF Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel asked Elbert County Clerk Dallas Schroeder to put him in touch with his attorney.

“We’re glad that the poster, which was meant to intimidate LGBT citizens

and promote Schroeder’s personal religion, has been removed from government property,” Seidel said. “The government must remain neutral on matters of religion and quoting the bible is hardly neutral.”

In an email exchange between several county clerks discussing how to handle same-sex marriage licenses, Schroeder wrote on Aug. 9: “It is a picture of a bride standing on a hill with the groom walking up the hill to meet her. On the bottom I have a portion of the verse in I Corinthians where Paul says, ‘Each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.’ And cite the verse.”

But after being sent several letters from Seidel and asking to speak with his lawyer, Schroeder apparently relented and removed the poster, at least from the sight of county constituents.

Church withdraws request for public funds

After FFRF objected to a Vermont board’s proposal to give a grant to a church, the church has rescinded its request. The Waitsfield Select Board had voted to place an item on the Town Meeting ballot in March 2016 to give \$1,500 to the Waitsfield United Church of Christ.

“The government may not fund projects for religious worship,” wrote Legal Fellow Ryan Jayne on Dec. 8. Jayne also pointed out that the Vermont Constitution prohibits funding of places of worship.

A Valley Reporter article published Dec. 24 said that to avoid controversy, the church representatives withdrew their request at the board’s Dec. 21 meeting — though not before castigating FFRF’s complainant for inviting “this crackpot Midwestern group into the discussion.”

The Pledge: ‘Under God’ or overly godly?

By C. Boyd Pfeiffer

In the seemingly continuous and contentious kerfuffle between the secular and religious segments of society, the “under God” phrase of the Pledge of Allegiance is constantly tossed about. Today there are bumper stickers which state emphatically “One Nation Under God.” In statements and speeches, the point is made that the phrase is from the founding fathers and the formation of this country and that the “under God” part has always been in the pledge. Wrong and wrong.

The pledge was not around in the 1770s and 1780s. As many of us know, the “under God” part was not a part of the original pledge. The Pledge of Allegiance was written in 1892 as a part of a promotion of The Youth’s Companion magazine to sell flags to schools for the 400th anniversary of Columbus’ landing in the new world. The magazine owner, Daniel Ford Sharp, thought that the country — then less than 30 years since the Civil War — needed a statement that would bring about a sense of unity and loyalty to the country.

The task of writing this statement that could be said in less than 15 seconds was given to editorial staff member Francis Bellamy, a Baptist minister, author and Christian socialist. He wanted to include the words “equality



C. Boyd Pfeiffer

and “fraternity” but demurred, knowing that the nation was not ready for either of these with women (the right to vote came in 1920) or blacks.

The original pledge was: “I pledge allegiance to my flag and the republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” This appeared in the Sept. 8, 1892, edition of the magazine, then with the widest circulation of any magazine in the country. Different iterations came almost immediately with “to” added in front of the “the republic” and others added up through 1924. The pledge then read as, “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands;

one nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

It remained that way, becoming the national pledge and called “The Pledge of Allegiance” by an Act of Congress in 1942. The “under God” part, which many secularists, humanists, agnostics, and atheists (myself included) want removed, was not added until 1954.

This was a time period after World War II of the Cold War and the fears of the “godless commies,” with us seeking a way to differentiate ourselves from the Soviet Communistic states. As a part of this growing anti-commie trend, on April 21, 1951, the New York branch of the Catholic Knights of Columbus decided to use the “under God” part of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address as a part of the pledge, ultimately encouraging this for all 800 branches throughout the country. They continued to push for this and on Aug. 21, 1952, urged making this “under God” part universal for all of the country and sent resolutions to this effect to the president, vice president, and speaker of the House of Representatives.

Rev. George Docherty pressed this point in a sermon at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in D.C., attended by President Eisenhower. This impressed Eisenhower and the inclusion of “under God” was passed in a congressional bill and signed by Eisenhower on Flag Day, June 14, 1954.

The problem with all of this is that it places a religious tone into a secular

patriotic pledge, something not agreed upon by all in this country. This government of the USA is (or is supposed to be) secular, to allow everyone privately to practice their own religious preferences. The country’s and government’s official documents are secular and have nothing to do with religion of any type. The founding fathers did not try to make this a Christian nation or the Constitution a Christian document.

Most importantly, “under God” in Lincoln’s day meant “God willing” far different from “under God” of today. “God willing” means if God approves, with God’s permission, with God’s blessing. “Under God” today means that we are under the control of God, obedient to God, that God is our protector, and God is watching over us.

For those who have different beliefs and yet are patriotic citizens of the country, that is offensive. The Pledge of Allegiance without “under God” served us well for 62 years. It is time for the “under God” part, fearfully cobbled into an otherwise perfectly good pledge, to go.

FFRF member Boyd Pfeiffer is a life-long atheist and award-winning writer with 28 books on sport fishing, along with magazine articles and newspaper columns to his credit. Recent more serious interest in religion and atheism has resulted in his 29th book, No Proof at All – A Cure for Christianity, available at book stores and Amazon. He can be reached at cbpfeiffer@msn.com.

FFRF 2015 annual convention speech

Ron Reagan – unabashed, unafraid

Ron Reagan’s speech, edited for space, was delivered Oct. 9, 2015, at FFRF’s 38th annual convention at Monona Terrace Convention Center in Madison, Wis. He was introduced by Co-President Dan Barker:

I think you all know who Ron Reagan is. After leaving the Joffrey Ballet in 1983, he’s worked as a broadcast and print journalist and TV and radio commentator. During his famous speech about stem cell research at the Democratic National Convention in 2004, he voiced his opinion on state/church separation, saying, “It does not follow that the theology of a few should be allowed to forestall the health and well-being of the many.”

The New York Times in 2004 asked Ron in an interview that ran three weeks after his father died if he would like to be president. Ron said, “I would be unelectable. I’m an atheist. And we all know that is something people won’t accept.”

Last year, as many of you know, he recorded a 30-second spot for FFRF to play on “60 Minutes” and other news shows. But to our shock, this very rational, very benign, slightly irreverent commercial was banned by several networks.

[AD PLAYS]: “Hi, I’m Ron Reagan, an unabashed atheist, and I’m alarmed by the intrusions of religion into our secular government. That’s why I am asking you to support the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the nation’s largest and most effective association of atheists and agnostics, working to keep state and church separate, just like our founding fathers intended. Please support the Freedom From Religion Foundation. Ron Reagan. Lifelong atheist. Not afraid of burning in hell.”

DAN: Having somebody of his celebrity status do an ad like that for us has just been an unparalleled, secular blessing, if I can use that word. We thought it would be appropriate to give Ron two tokens of our appreciation. The first one, a T-shirt. Come on up here, Ron, unabashed atheist, not afraid of burning in hell. And a plaque: “Ron Reagan, 2015 Freedom From Religion Foundation, not afraid of burning in hell, unabashed atheist,” for your wall.

By Ron Reagan

Thank you very much. I want to thank everybody, Dan and Annie Laurie, and all of you for having me here and setting all of this up. I also want to thank our previous speakers, Jeremiah [Camara] and Taslima [Nasrin]. We should also be thankful, particularly in light of Taslima’s remarks, that we live in a society where we can have a meeting like this.

It’s not a perfect society, plenty of things wrong, plenty of issues we’re aware of, but we’re not really worried that people are going to storm the hall here and gun everybody down or set us all on fire, and that’s worth acknowledging. But don’t make the mistake of thinking that it never could. These are human impulses, and we are human beings. These sorts of things exist on a continuum, and they could indeed happen here.



Andrew Seidel photo

Ron Reagan shows off the plaque he was presented with at FFRF’s 38th annual convention on Oct. 9, 2015. The plaque reads, “Ron Reagan, 2015 Freedom From Religion Foundation, Not Afraid of Burning in Hell, Unabashed Atheist.”

I’m not abashed to be an atheist all. I am abashed, I have to say, to be here. I am particularly abashed being here with somebody like Taslima, who frankly leaves me in a state of awe. We’ve suffered some perhaps for our atheism, but we do not have a fatwa against us.

As Dan said, by age 12 I told my parents, “I’m not going to church anymore. I don’t believe this stuff.” I guess you could say I grew up in a religious household, but we weren’t that religious. We didn’t pray before dinner. We were Presbyterian, a sort of Christianity Lite.

I was a little strange as a kid because at a very early age I became interested in prehistoric humans, what I thought of, at age 5, as cavemen. I’d seen that

little chart where the primates get taller and straighter and finally they’re us. So where did Adam and Eve fit into all of that?

[Ron gets in some zingers about bible stories, summarized here]:

Apparently trouble is brewing in Eden, because Eve gets Adam to eat from the tree of knowledge. Even to a little kid, knowledge sounds like a pretty good thing, and it’s a little confusing why God is so upset that his creation would acquire knowledge. Something’s not right here.

Noah’s ark, another good story for kids. It’s like a Carnival cruise with stuffed toys, but you get a little older and start wondering where the hell are the dinosaurs? How did the animals

We were Presbyterian, a sort of Christianity Lite.

choose which two got to go on the boat? Why did God have to drown all the animals? He had a beef with humans, but did the animals have to go, too?

Eventually you get to Abraham and Isaac. Little kids identify with Isaac, who’s trussed up on that rock waiting for dad to plunge a dagger into him, and that doesn’t seem too cool. Abraham’s definitely not the hero here, and you start looking at your own father a little strangely, too. “Hey son, how about a barbecue tonight?” “No, no, why don’t we just order a pizza, OK, and put down the knife.”

I don’t ever buy these stories of people who say, “Well, you know, I was religious, and then I became an atheist, and then I went back to religion.” No you didn’t, you never became an atheist in the first place, because once you’re there you’re not going back. Once you’re an atheist, everything that somebody religious says sounds like “The Mountain God made us do it.” It’s all just a little ridiculous.

No hell below us

Networks did not want my ad for FFRF on the air. I understand that they didn’t want to offend viewers, and religious people get offended so easily. I had a conversation with my brother-in-law about this at dinner the other night at my place in Seattle. He likes to give me crap about stuff, although he’s actually an atheist.

“I saw that commercial you did the other night,” he said. “Don’t you think it was a little, you know, arrogant.”

Arrogant? Why am I arrogant for saying I don’t believe in hell, but you’re not saying that people who claim to know the entire story of the universe and talk to God the creator are arrogant? I’m arrogant just for saying “how do you know”?

The religious, they’re very arrogant. In the Muslim community, as Taslima mentioned, it gets pretty crazy. You draw a cartoon and suddenly they’re burning down your country’s embassy. You write a book and you’ve got a fatwa against you. They don’t seem to get that they don’t have a right not to be offended. You don’t have a right, it seems to me, to be offended by somebody else’s speech.

What offended people the most about the ad, which seemed pretty benign, frankly, was the last line about hell. Hell is a very touchy topic for the religious, and you can understand why. Hell is the way you control people. You better do what we say or you go to hell. You may do fine in this world, but oh, eternity is stretching out ahead of you and it’s all going to be hell.

Sam Harris does an interesting thing. He says to an audience, after determining that most are not Muslim, for example: “All right, you Christians, you atheists, realize that there are perhaps a billion Muslims on Earth who are dead certain that you are going to hell.” He pauses for the kicker: “Notice how little sleep you’re losing over that thought.”



Ingrid Laas photo

Ron Reagan talks about his controversial 30-second ad for FFRF that aired on television. “What offended people the most about the ad . . . was the last line about hell. Hell is a very touchy subject for the religious, and you can understand why. Hell is the way you control people.”

Religious folks don't realize that their warnings about hell are about something we consider to be imaginary. We don't care. You might as well tell me I'm going to Oz. It's related to the concept that we're all atheists. Even the religionists are atheists. They're atheists about every other god except theirs.

Not one of them believes in Zeus, a few believe in Vishnu. They're fine being atheists about that. We just go one god further. We take it all the way.

'Bound by disbelief'

You have to admit, though, that this is a little weird, gathering here together. A lot of you came from other places, even other countries, to meet here in Madison, Wisconsin. We're all bound by disbelief. There's a certain disadvantage to this, you have to admit. We don't have soaring cathedrals. We don't have special outfits. We don't really have rituals.

Yes, we do have faith, if you'll pardon the expression, in things like reason and facts, scientific inquiry, the truth and the pursuit of it. But still, we're all about *not* believing in something. And let's face it, there's no such thing as a Round Earth Society.

We're a minority. Millions of people in the United States think we're going to hell. They think we worship Satan, which is a little ironic since we don't believe in him, either. They all think we're strident. Strident atheist, angry, aggressive atheist, mean-spirited atheist. They love playing the victim and know the foundation is crumbling a little bit. Any critique of religion is regarded as an insult.

Richard Dawkins is accused of being strident when he invokes facts to support critical thinking. Kim Davis, the Kentucky clerk, is fitted for the robes of martyrdom when she invokes God in defense of bigotry. It's all about insecurity. Religious people are terribly insecure. They know that they're holding a weak hand, so they resort to the absurd.

Fox News gears up for the war on Christmas. I love Christmas. I cut down a tree every year and put presents under it. It's a pagan holiday, why not? The war on Christmas? Come on, it's the most ubiquitous holiday on Earth.

Yes, speak up

With the Hubble telescope, we can look out into the vastness of the universe and understand how ridiculous it seems to believe that an ostensible creator deity made the whole thing just for us. Why did he wait so long to bring us on to the scene? Some 13.8 billion years old and we only arrived, you know, the day before yesterday. Well, God had a plan, I guess. It's what they say, God had a plan.

What we know from science makes Genesis and the bible story seem rather tacky and small. I'm going with the Hubble telescope. I'm going with Stephen Hawking.

So what do we do here trapped in this strange "Twilight Zone" world with a bunch of people who are perhaps delusional? I'm sure we've all been at cocktail parties or in a small group and somebody, suddenly out of nowhere, decides to inform you that the hurricane that hit the coast the other day was God's punishment for being nice to gay people. What do you do in that situation? Do you speak up or do you shut up?

I say you speak up. You don't have to do this all the time. If somebody says "God bless you" when you sneeze, that's not your invitation to jump all



Ingrid Laas photo

"Blind faith is the abdication of reason," Reagan said during his keynote speech at the convention. "You can't have a functioning democracy when most of the people believe in a lot of nonsense."

over them. But there are lines that get crossed, and I think at that point you're obligated to speak up.

Religious belief is understandable from an evolutionary standpoint, so we don't have to necessarily get angry at these people. The question arises though, when we're talking about individuals and not people in positions of power, should we care what they believe? Should we bother to talk to them about atheism?

Yes, I think we should, given the opportunity, the right circumstances. Blind faith is the abdication of reason. You can't have a functioning democracy when most of the people believe in a lot of nonsense. If you want good public policy, it has to be based on facts and evidence. Private beliefs invade public policy. All the politicians you see invoking God were just private citizens once, and now they are in Congress.

We should confront people but with some sensitivity. Religious people are not necessarily stupid or crazy. Some of them may be. Are they delusional? The fervently religious certainly are, but again, this is understandable to a degree.

A word about death. We accept that most religions are predicated on the fear of death. The idea of an afterlife can be a very powerful thing. I think it was Sam Harris who reminded people to consider that they may be talking to a mother who has just lost a child and don't make it seem as if you're saying, "Your sincere wish to be reunited with that child at some time and place in the afterlife is ridiculous. You're never going to see that child again and the whole thing is just a big joke."



Ingrid Laas photo

Ron Reagan

I know from personal experience that when you lose somebody close, you very much want to think that you can be reunited with that person. This is a natural human urge.

But it's not cruel to apply the same standards of discourse to religion as we do to politics, our aesthetic judgments, our taste in music or film. We argue, sometimes viciously, about those sorts of things, but religion somehow is treated as different. Sacrosanct, if you will.

Religious people are terribly insecure. They know that they're holding a weak hand, so they resort to the absurd.

Questions and answers

I find that asking religious people questions is a good idea. They say the "Well, you know God made the universe and — " Wait a minute, what is God? This turns out to be something of a stumper for the religious. Most of them really can't explain to you what they mean when they invoke God. They order their entire lives around this deity that is just this vague thing to them. Oh, they'll say, "Well, God is love, God is the creator."

Then there is the problem that no religionist can really handle. If God is good and all-loving and all-knowing and all-powerful, how does he tolerate the suffering of the innocent, particularly small children? Either God sees this happening and can't do anything about it or just doesn't really care to do anything about it. Which is it? They don't know.

They have questions for us as well, which I rather enjoy. "Well, without religion, where would we get all the great art of the Renaissance, the great cathedrals and the Sistine Chapel and all that? If it weren't for religion, we wouldn't have any of that stuff." It's true that religion financed a lot of that kind of stuff. But I can tell you with dead certainty that the people who

built the Duomo in Florence and Michelangelo painting the Sistine Chapel didn't do it a state of religious fervor. In order to build those buildings and create those artworks, they needed reason and intellect. Financed by religion, yes, but it was the only game in town at that point.

The other thing that you always get is, "Well, how do you know good from evil? How do you know how to behave if you don't have the book telling you how to behave?" First of all, that book is not exactly an infallible reference for behavior. There's an awful lot of fratricide and infanticide and all sorts of bad lessons in the bible. Abraham and Isaac is one of them.

What about Sodom and Gomorrah? What kind of a hero is this? The angels show up. The townspeople gather around Lot's house wanting to rape the angels, because you would, you know. Lot, being the good host that he is, isn't going to let that happen. So what does he do? Leave the angels alone. Take my daughters instead and do whatever you want with them, because really, they're just women.

The answer is easy. It's inherent to us. Little children understand automatically, intrinsically, the Golden Rule that you treat other people like you want to be treated. You have to encourage it, but they know it. Animals know it, too.

Kim Davis, bigot

You all know more about the fight against the incursion of religion into public life than I do, but there are a few things we can talk about. We can start with Kim Davis, the poster child for bigotry, the October centerfold in Bigot magazine. As a county clerk in Kentucky, she decided that not only was she refusing to issue marriage licenses to gay couples, she wasn't going to let anybody in her office do it either. She famously invoked God's authority.

Religious bullying is what it amounts to. People have tried to make her out to be the equivalent of wartime conscientious objectors. If Kim Davis were actually a conscientious objector, there would be a couple of obvious courses of action for her. The first one, probably the best: quit. If you were elected to do a certain job and find that you can't in good conscience do that job anymore, resign.

Her other option was to let her associate clerks do it. But no, Kim couldn't go with that. She got it straight from God that they shouldn't be allowed to do this. A lot of conservatives were bright enough to see where this would inevitably lead.

How would Kim Davis feel if a Muslim clerk the next county over decided we have to practice Shariah law there. Would she be OK with that? I think not. I don't think Kim Davis is really into religious freedom as such. She just wants to be free to practice the kind of bigotry that she sees in the bible.

A lot of constitutional conservatives get on the side of people like Kim Davis. Constitutional conservatives are people who think that the only worthwhile thing in the Constitution is the Second Amendment. Clearly, the entire Constitution was created just so we could carry sidearms into bars and kindergarten classes.

Planned Parenthood

Remember that religion trains your mind to accept the reality of things that aren't real and to accept assertions based on no evidence whatsoever or demonstrably false evidence. It be

Continued on next page

Continued from page 11
came very obvious that the congressional hearing wasn't about selling fetal body parts or about federal money going to Planned Parenthood. It was all about abortion.

I was arguing with a conservative on the radio the other day. I reminded him that it's possible to have qualms about abortion without thinking that you have to deceive people in order to make your argument. It's so frustrating that people in the media and in politics act as if the videos that came out show Planned Parenthood doing something illegal. They do not. They were deceptively edited and altered in all sorts of ways. Why is that not the story? Why is the story Planned Parenthood and not the fact that these people had an agenda and thought it was perfectly OK to lie in order to further that agenda?

And people, mostly on the right, believe this stuff. They don't care that the video is fake. They don't take care that the facts show something completely different. This is what religion teaches your mind to accept. If you believe in the supernatural, you can believe in just about anything. Reason goes right out the window.

Did you ever see the discussion between Richard Dawkins the biologist and Wendy Wright the creationist? Oh my god.

First of all, Wright is dumb as a post and Dawkins is not. She keeps saying "show me the evidence" of evolution. Dawkins, of course, keeps explaining the evidence to her and offers to take her down the street to the Museum of Natural History to show her the actual skulls and things like that. But she doesn't want to see any actual evidence. What an annoying person.

If you believe in the supernatural, you can believe in just about anything.

Climate change

God is often invoked by the climate change deniers, particularly those in



Ingrid Laas photo

“We do believe in things as atheists,” Reagan said at the convention. “We believe in truth, we believe in beauty, we believe in a shared humanity. These are things worth fighting for.”

Congress. Jim Inhofe is in charge of the Senate committee that oversees environmental regulation and has written a whole book claiming that climate change is a hoax. One of his lines of reasoning, if you want to call it that, is that we don't control the climate, God does, and we can't do anything about this because God is in charge.

I did Bill Maher's show a couple of weeks ago, so I watched a few of his shows to kind of get into the mood. I caught his interview with Rick Santorum, in which Santorum made several noteworthy claims. Do you know, he asked Maher, that 57% of climate scientists don't agree that human influence is responsible for climate change?

Thank God, pardon the expression, that Maher is a comedian and not a trained journalist, because you would never see Jake Tapper or any of his colleagues responding like Maher did: "Rick, I don't know what ass you're pulling that out of."

About 97% of scientists agree that humans are driving global warming, but reality doesn't matter to people like Rick Santorum and his fellow religionists. While he's going to be rap-

tured, we'll be stuck down here on a sweltering planet.

Lamar Smith is a Texas congressman who is sort of Jim Inhofe's counterpart in the House. Smith has claimed that there's been no global warming for the last 17 years. He says warming stopped in 1998. In fact, 10 of the warmest years on record have taken place since 1998. Lamar Smith — don't you bet that he goes to church on Sunday? — is just making stuff up.

Doing right

I started by saying that we were joined in disbelief, and we are. But it's worth mentioning that we do believe things as well, and we have certain obligations. It seems to me those beliefs oblige us to behave in a certain way. We live in a global society, and there are many, many Taslimas around the world. We are all complicit to some degree in their subjugation, their religious oppression.

People on the left, I have to say, will often recoil when you start identifying cultures as being repressive, particularly about women. A culture that doesn't allow women to dress the way they

want to dress, that doesn't allow women meaningful political participation equal to that of a man, doesn't allow women to drive, doesn't allow them to leave their home without being accompanied by a male — all the things that Taslima was talking about — that's not a culture worth preserving.

They may have beautiful paintings and things like that, I think that's fine. They may make nice buildings, and that's fine, they can keep those. But the rest of that stuff, it's got to go. Why are we doing business with countries that practice that sort of oppression?

Imagine if tomorrow, France and Germany decided they would institute a dress code for women and deny them political participation and impose all these sorts of rules. Imagine what the reaction would be, imagine the calls for boycotts, the calls for international isolation of France and Germany, the shock and revulsion we would all feel if these countries would do something like that. Yet we continue to do business with countries that do—Saudi Arabia, for instance, notable among them.

We need to put pressure on countries to do the right thing, to treat their citizens humanely. I don't care about their culture, don't care about their religion either. Sorry, it doesn't matter, it's not a culture worth preserving if that's how you express that culture.

We *do* believe in things as atheists. We believe in truth, we believe in beauty, we believe in a shared humanity. These are things worth fighting for. And don't forsake the numinous and the transcendent either. We all know that there are experiences we haven't analyzed that are more than just material.

You listen to a piece of music, you see a sunset, whatever it might be, poetry, and you "leave" yourself in a way. Don't let religion have a monopoly on that kind of experience. It is not specific to religions. We need to reclaim the numinous and the transcendent as well as all these other things. You are the point of the spear in that, all of us are. We need to take it seriously, and we need to do right by the Taslimas of the world, if nothing else.

If nothing else, we *have* to do right by all of the Taslimas of the world. Thank you so much for having us. Thank you.

FFRF ‘delighted’ to win ‘Scrooge’ award from Religious Right

FFRF has been named the winner of the 2015 "Scrooge Award" by the arch-conservative Liberty Institute, for FFRF's "particularly ravenous agenda to strip religious liberty from their fellow Americans."

FFRF's "ravenous agenda," of course, is enforcing the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the Constitution. According to the Liberty Institute, FFRF won the award for "launching a national assault in 2015 on law enforcement officers and the national motto. FFRF sent more than 60 letters to various police departments and sheriffs' offices — demanding that the officers remove the national motto, 'In God We Trust,' from their vehicles."

Liberty Institute asked voters to help determine the victor, telling readers that "2015 saw more hostility to religious freedom than any year in our nation's history. But among the flood of

legal attacks, some antagonists deserve special recognition for their particularly ravenous agenda to strip religious liberty from their fellow Americans."

"FFRF is delighted to be named an 'antagonist deserving special recognition' from Liberty Institute," says FFRF Co-President Dan Barker, a former evangelical minister. "It means we must be doing something right!"

FFRF is also proud to be associated with the other Scrooge nominees, which include:

Bremerton School District of Bremerton, Wash., for suspending high school football coach Joe Kennedy for praying with players after games. FFRF was also involved in this runner-up issue, sending a letter in support of the school district in October.

Georgia Department of Public Health, for firing District Health Director, Dr. Eric Walsh, for his homopho-

bia. Walsh also called evolution a "religion created by Satan."

Mikey Weinstein from Military Religious Freedom Foundation, for complaining to the U.S. Air Force Academy about the football players praying in public before games.

The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, for requiring religious non-profit organizations to abide by the Affordable Care Act birth control mandate like every other employer, or, as Liberty Institute spins it, "attempting to force religious, non-profit organizations to provide insurance coverage for abortion-inducing drugs to their employees, with utter disregard to the ministries' rights of conscience."

In 2014 FFRF was named one of the seven nominees for the "honor." The 2014 Scrooge winner was the Military Religious Freedom Foundation.

Overheard

If your children tell you they're atheist, take the time to ask them about their beliefs. And then listen. Instead of hearing that they hate God or have no values, I expect you'll be impressed at how thoughtful and considerate they are.

August Brunsman, executive director of Secular Student Alliance, op-ed, "How to welcome atheist kids home for the holidays"

Washington Post, 12-23-15

The secularists are winning, not because they are "anti-God," but because the forces which have brought about the diminution and the subsequent abandonment of traditional religious thinking cannot and will not be reversed.

John Shelby Spong, retired Episcopalian bishop, "Building the Case for the Death of Theism: The Copernican Revolution"

johnshelbyspong.com, 12-24-15

Meet Eryn’s ‘adorable atheist activism’

By Eryn Johnson

A warm hello to all of y’all and welcome to a world of activism and atheism of the adorable sort. I’ve lived in this state for a good while, and I certainly hope you’ll enjoy your stay.

This isn’t Vegas. What happens here isn’t meant to stay here. It’s meant to spread like wildfire until all the lifeless wood is burned to ash and the forest is renewed.

I was raised atheist by a brilliant father in the great red state of South Carolina. The only time to my knowledge that this state was considered ahead of its time was when it marched to the front of the line and became the first state to secede from the Union in 1860. The Confederate battle flag continued to wave over the statehouse until this past July when news of the surrender apparently trickled in from Appomattox.

I’m 36 with a son nearing his 18th birthday, and I have a drawl that can melt butter. A Southern spitfire will do what she wants when she wants and just how she pleases, and so I became an adorable atheist activist. I don’t remember exactly when I began calling my particular brand of nonbelief “adorable atheism,” but once I did it stuck.

I’m a Floridian now and attended my first FreeFlo conference in November in Orlando, where I was lucky enough to meet a bucketful of skeptical folks far wiser and kinder than I’ll ever be. I chatted with Seth Andrews, played trivia with Matt Dillahunt, enjoyed a little concert with Dan Barker at the piano and shared ideas with my new favorite altruistic attorney, Andrew Seidel. Thanks to him, I’ve been afforded the opportunity to share in this space some of the many tenets and traditions of my style of atheism.

The point was to instill altruism for its own sake.

As the “war on Christmas” rages around us, I am continuing our Giving Season, because it’s important to embrace our holiday traditions. This year we had a traditional feast on the Saturday before Thanksgiving, with a mostly atheist crowd of new friends here. One of the main topics was our potential response to the county sheriff plastering “In God We Trust” stickers on all the patrol cars.

We were doing “Friendsgiving” at our house while I was in college back in 2000, a single mother working as a tutor to make ends meet. My favorite students were always the foreign exchange kids, the ones with stories I’d never heard before.

After spending countless hours trying to drag non-native English speakers through a 10-page research paper, you really have no choice but to develop deep and meaningful friendships with them. Before long, the tutoring lab was always full, whether people needed tutoring or not.

Before you could say “midterms,” fall break fell and many of my favorite scholars found they either had nowhere to go or no means to get there. Unacceptable!



Eryn Johnson’s smile and altruism might just bowl you over.

I went home, talked to my daddy and made a plan. Did we have the home or the money to host a big feast? Not no, but HELL NO! A divorce had inverted daddy’s pockets, but we did it anyway.

We asked all the foreign exchange students (if they could afford/manage it) to bring a traditional dish from their home country to pass. We handled the great American tradition: turkey, stuffing, “mershed perderders,” etc.

We also asked everyone to bring folding chairs or be really comfortable with the idea of sitting on the floor with the dog. The first year we hosted, there was a Canadian, a handful of Japanese girls, a strapping Bosnian, two Indians, three Kosovar refugees and a half-dozen good old fat, lazy ‘Muricans. Although we still called it Thanksgiving at the time, our tradition of Friendsgiving was born and it has grown every year.

The Giving Season

My college comrades and I sat around eating, intellectualizing and batting back and forth strategies to build a liberal utopia. In 2000, my bouncing baby boy Tad was just 2 tender years old. I had a deep desire to show him that there was so much more to life than material wealth and that helping our fellow man, and woman, was far more rewarding than any toy or present could ever be.

We’d never decorated, strung lights or put up a tree. We really didn’t have any traditions other than cooking a big meal on or around the Christmas holiday, a veritable repeat of Friendsgiving, but it was time to give birth to something more. Thus, the Giving Season was born, and there were no virgins involved, save my tiny son.

I decided that I would drag Tad along to help me with various service projects from the day after Thanksgiving until New Year’s Day. I wanted to teach him the importance of giving. Notice I did not say giving back; I said giving. The point was to instill altruism for its own sake.

We started small, volunteering to help neighbors and friends with small projects. When my brother was deployed to Iraq with the 82nd Airborne, we started sending massive soldier holiday CARE packages (which we still do). We progressed to unfolding newspapers and scrubbing poop out of cages at our local Humane Society.

It was there that I spearheaded a junior group for ages 11 to 17 where I taught the importance of proper animal care (nutrition, vaccination, spaying and neutering) and the dangers of animal cruelty and neglect. We did a boatload of fundraisers where I put my son in a cage with a puppy and told people we couldn’t let either of them out until they raised enough money to save a fur baby. Shameless, I know, but it worked.

In first grade, he had to write what he would do if he got a million dollars for Christmas. His response was give it away to people who really needed it because he already had everything he needed. (We were paddling against the current pretty vigorously ourselves at the time!)

His very Southern, very Christian teacher called me, concerned that I was making him grow up too fast. If you asked him again today, he’d probably buy himself a better car, ask his mama if she needed anything, pay off my house even when I said no and give the rest away.

So if I leave you with nothing else, I must profess the greatest tenet of adorable atheist activism is this: “People first. Stuff later.”

Happy Giving Season, y’all.

FFRF member Eryn Johnson’s Florida home is often referred to as the Johnson House for Wayward Boys as she has opened her doors not only to atheists shunned by their families, but more recently to a cancer patient without means to medical care and a homeless transgendered youth. She always seems to find room for “just one more” in need of a soft place to land. Her favorite party crasher is a newly rescued Cane Corso (aka Italian mastiff). She named him Spaghetti, because what else would you name him?

Overheard

You just wouldn’t believe how that sells. We buy a thousand copies from Random House every year, year after year.

Ahmad Saeed, Pakistani bookseller, on Richard Dawkins’ book *The God Delusion*
New York Times, 11-25-15

For me, the Islamist groups on the ground are like the Ku Klux Klan in the U.S., or the Nazis in Germany. In Iraq, they wanted to legalize marriage for 9-year-old girls. How can we live with that?

Yanar Mohammed, who runs a secret network of safe houses for honor-killing runaways, rape survivors, war widows and other women in her native Iraq
New York Times, 11-28-15

Everyone says he’s in a better place. They’re wrong. He should be here in my arms and in my house.

Joe Wise, Racine, Wis., father of Hunter Wise, 3, scalded to death in a bathtub as punishment for soiling his pants by his mother’s boyfriend, who was sentenced to 40 years
Wisconsin State Journal, 12-1-15

Your “thoughts” should be about steps to take to stop this carnage. Your “prayers” should be for forgiveness if you do nothing — again.

Tweet by Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., after the San Bernardino mass shooting
twitter.com, 12-2-15

I cannot in good conscience continue to be part of a council that is exclusionary or to work with a mayor who is such.

Councilwoman Charlene Storey, Roselle Park, N.J., who resigned (for a day) after the city voted to change a local ceremony from “A Tree Lighting” to “A Christmas Tree Lighting”
NJ.com, 12-4-15

We are inundated by quick-trigger platitudes of compassion — a flood of ‘thoughts and prayers’ that never stops but doesn’t amount to much. Herewith, then, a simple, practical adaptation of Miranda: You have a right to your thoughts and prayers — and to remain silent about them.

Mark Leibovich, national correspondent for The New York Times Magazine, “Do politicians’ ‘thoughts and prayers’ mean anything?”
New York Times Magazine, 10-13-15

To oppose the use of “In God We Trust” decals on police vehicles is not to insult Christians or to drive God out of the public square. Rather, it is to insist that public services be offered to all citizens in a way that is respectful of their religious beliefs, and that does not threaten to make anyone seeking police and sheriff services feel marginalized.

James Croft, op-ed, “Police cars belong to the public, not God”
St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 12-3-15

We do not represent any religion, what we represent are the laws of the land. As far as I’m concerned, there is no place in government for religion. I’m a secularist in that respect. I just don’t think there’s a place for any kind of religious doctrine in government, because we represent everybody.

Mayor Bob Scott, Franklin, N.C., after being sworn in on a copy of the Constitution rather than the bible
WLOS News, 12-11-15

A report to members from the co-presidents

Freedom From Religion Foundation

Year in Review — 2015

By Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker

We're not "believers," but as executive directors of a 501(c)(3) nonprofit non-profit, we "religiously" believe in reporting what FFRF does with membership dues. Below is a summary of 2015 FFRF actions.

Last year was marked by the death of FFRF's principal founder, Anne Nicol Gaylor, age 88. Anne founded FFRF regionally in 1976 (with the assistance of Annie Laurie, then a college student, and Jon Sontarck, an elderly gentleman from Milwaukee who died in 1977). She was asked to take FFRF national in 1978. When Wisconsin State Journal's Doug Erickson asked Anne about FFRF's "in your face" name, Anne replied: "I've never liked euphemisms. If you have something to say, say it." The New York Times' obituary heralded Anne as "An atheist who saw religion as an oppressor of women and the cause of wars."

Anne was one of many valued members FFRF lost last year — including FFRF's honorary director, Oliver Sacks, M.D. The brilliant author touchingly noted in The New York Times op-ed announcing his terminal cancer:

"My generation is on the way out, and each death I have felt as an abruption, a tearing away of part of myself. There will be no one like us when we are gone. . . . When people die, they cannot be replaced. They leave holes that cannot be filled. . . ."

The past year saw completion and the grand opening of FFRF's three-year building expansion, attaching a five-story addition to our original pre-Civil War two-story building and topping that with a full-floor library. We're luxuriating not just in space, adding many much-needed modest-sized offices and work areas, but in creating a showplace for freethought. (More details on our "reborn" Freethought Hall below.)

Also notable, FFRF won five lawsuits in 2015, ended more than 200 state/church entanglements through legal letters, and launched several necessary new lawsuits. (More details in the legal section below.)

Here's to an even feistier 2016, with your help, in our work for reason to prevail!



Ingrid Laas photo

FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor

FFRF reaches more than 23,000 members

Welcome to the 2,000 new members who have joined the Freedom From Religion Foundation last year. FFRF reached **23,467 members** in 2015. Thank you to FFRF's newest 236 Lifetime Members, and several "After-Life" Members (a tongue-in-cheek category for those who wish their membership to live after them).

Increased membership gives FFRF more clout as a national state/church watchdog and the nation's largest freethought (atheist, agnostic, etc.) association. The best source of new members is other members — you! Please spread the word!

Freethought Hall Grand Opening



Ingrid Laas photo

WWII veteran Joseph Cunningham stands next to the Atheist in Foxholes monument outside FFRF's offices.

FFRF hosted more than 400 freethinkers from around the country during its Grand Opening of the Freethought Hall expansion on Oct. 9, kicking off the annual national convention in Madison, Wis. Brunch goodies and Champagne flowed in the beautiful 4th floor **Charlie Brooks Auditorium** and music flowed too, with Dan Barker entertaining on the **Diane Uhl Concert Grand Steinway** piano. Members toured the just-completed **Rose Zerkow Memorial Garden and Courtyard** with members' pavers, the **Atheists in Foxholes monument** honoring freethinking vets, the vestibule with memorial and member tiles, the **Anne Nicol Gaylor Lobby** with plaques naming our generous major donors, the **Brian Bolton Executive Wing** and **Patrick O'Reiley Editorial Wing** (first floor), the **Diane Uhl Legal Wing**, 2nd floor, the **Harold Erickson Public Relations Wing**, the **Joel B. Landon & Wanda Y. Beers Freethought Library**, and the **Stephen Uhl "Friendly Atheist" Studio** — 3rd floor. The Lower Level mailing area is named the **Harry Lonsdale "No Hell Below Us" Wing**, and the cupola with views of the Wisconsin State Capitol is called the **Kenneth Proulx "Above Us Only Sky."** FFRF also erected the first-ever "atheist marquee," an educational digital signboard.

Csam Wheatley's silicone sculpture of Charles Darwin, a life-like, life-sized mannequin, amazes visitors to the library, and serves as a photo op.



Jake Swenson photo

Csam Wheatley shows off the incredibly life-like mannequin of Charles Darwin he created.

FFRF makes the news every day

FFRF's state/church work, litigation and educational campaigns generated over **2,394 bonafide news stories** about FFRF in daily and online newspapers in 2015, plus more than **304 local and some national TV news segments**. Among staff appearances, FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor appeared on national "CBS This Morning" on Sept. 3, talking about the mass baptism of Georgia high school football players — which our complaint halted for the future. She also appeared on Sean Hannity on July 9, where it was famously four against one! You can Google these shows, or read and watch media coverage daily at ffrf.org/news/media.

FFRF generates own media. At the year's end, we said goodbye to **Bill Dunn** as editor of Freethought Today, published 10 times a year, and welcomed his colleague, also a former staff member at The Capital Times newspaper, **PJ Slinger**. Bill will stay on part-time to continue to compile Black Collar Crimes.

Freethought Radio, a weekly radio show and podcast, hosted by **Dan Barker** and **Annie Laurie Gaylor**, celebrated its 500th show in early December. In December, FFRF hit another landmark, beginning to broadcast from its own **Stephen Uhl "Friendly Atheist" Studio**. The radio show broadcasts originally in **Madison, Wis.**, 92.1 FM., streaming on Saturdays at 11 a.m. CST. All-time stats: Freethought Radio has had 6.3 million podcast listeners since 2006, and averages 13,000 downloads per weekly show. (See wrap for other broadcast cities.)

FFRF maintains a timely and detailed website full of news, views, blogs, archives, online versions of Freethought Today, ads, films and photos. FFRF posted and sent media **341 press releases** and 49 public action alerts (plus many unpublished alerts to members in particular regions or states).

New Freethought Now! blog. FFRF posted 87 blogs this year, including 54 "Freethought Now!" commentaries at our new blog site hosted by Patheos. FFRF's blog is part of the Atheist Channel, which includes Hemant Mehta's popular "Friendly Atheist" blog. We thank **Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel** for his initiative in suggesting and setting this up. Access FFRF's blog at patheos.com/blogs/freethought-now/. Analytics show that the blog is introducing a younger audience, 46% female, 54% male, logging more than 275,000 page views and generating a modest income for FFRF.

FFRF has 351,658 "friends" on **Facebook**, and 37,154 followers on **Twitter**.

Look for FFRF's new TV show later this year, produced in the Stephen Uhl Friendly Atheist Studio!

PR/educational campaigns continue

TV advertising. FFRF placed the effective **Ron Reagan TV commercial** on CNN periodically in 2015 and ran Ron's ad on the penultimate "Daily Show" (Comedy Central). All other major networks have censored our ad. Apparently, when the son of a former Republican president comes out "unabashedly" as an atheist, "not afraid of burning in hell," it's too powerful a message!

Print advertising. FFRF is running successful monthly one-third page ads in



Ingrid Laas photo

Ron Reagan

Scientific American featuring testimonials by scientists or scientific thinkers, many of them honorary officers of FFRF, including FFRF's **Honorary President Steven Pinker**. FFRF placed several prominent full-page ads protesting the pope's address to Congress in September, and a two-page ad in the New York Times on Bill of Rights Day (Dec. 15).

\$35,850 in student essay scholarships

In 2015, the **William J. Schultz Memorial Scholarship**, for college-bound high school seniors, helped a record number of students. Seniors picked from two topics, "Why I'm good without God" or "Atheist/Nonbeliever of color." FFRF awarded top winners in both categories for a total of 23 students and \$17,950 in prizes. The college competition, a memorial to **Michael Hakeem**, a sociology professor, awarded a total of \$9,250 in scholarships to 11 college students. Lifetime Member **Professor Brian Bolton** sponsors the graduate student essay competition, which had eight winners receiving a total of \$8,650 in prizes.

Dorea and Dean Schramm provided each winning student who is a member of a secular student club (or FFRF) with a \$50-\$100 bonus.

\$32,000 awarded to 11 student activists



Andrew Seidel photo

Jarvis Idowu

Ten thousand dollars from the **Catherine Fahringer Memorial Student Activist Award** was awarded to four ongoing, freethinking college students of color with financial need, in partnership with Black Skeptics of Los Angeles.

Awarded \$2,500 each were: Mercedes Hawkins, Zera Montemayor, Adrienne Parks and Therrin Wilson.

Three young high school students in New England who challenged their high school's Pledge of Allegiance each received \$1,000: Gabriella Ferrell, the **Allen P. Wilkinson Student Activist Award**; Lily San Giovanni, the **Strong Backbone Student Activist Award** (endowed by a New York member, age 81); and Morrigan Turner, in memory of **Tony Ross**. Legal Intern Jarvis Idowu, who worked all three years of law school for FFRF, received \$1,000 from the **Paul J. Gaylor Memorial Scholarship**. Ewan McCartney, grade 8, received the **Minglin Zhang Student Award** of \$1,000 for sitting down for his rights (protesting the religious Pledge of Allegiance) in Seattle. Benjamin Oyakawa received the \$1,000 **Thomas Jefferson Youth Activist Award** (endowed by Len and Karen Eisenberg) for bravely speaking out against religious entanglements.

Three special teenagers each received the \$5,000 **Richard and Beverly Hermesen Student Activist Award** for significant achievement. They include the student plaintiff in FFRF's victorious challenge of a Ten Commandments marker at a Pennsylvania school, and the student involved in similar litigation in another Pennsylvania school. Also receiving \$5,000 was Thomas Sheedy, a New York teenager who fought his school for two years for the right to start a secular club.

FFRF creates
Nonbelief Relief

Nonbelief Relief, Inc., was newly incorporated in mid-2015, with FFRF as its sole member. The board is made up of Annie Laurie Gaylor, Dan Barker, Jim Zerwick, Stephen Hirtle and Lisa Strand as secretary/treasurer. Nonbelief Relief seeks to remediate conditions of human suffering and injustice, whether the result of natural disasters, human actions or adherence to religious dogma. It also seeks to provide assistance for individuals targeted for non-belief, secular activism or blasphemy. Non-belief Relief additionally will be challenging the IRS’s privileging of churches and their charities by seeking tax exemption without filing the annual Form 990 (although it will post the form for the public). In 2015, Non-belief Relief gave \$74,500, including:

- \$20,000 to **Doctors Without Borders** after the Oct. 3 aerial bombing by the U.S. military of the group’s hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan, killing 22 people and injuring 37.
- \$10,000: **Camp Quest** scholarships to help needy students who could not otherwise afford to attend 2016 camps.
- \$12,000: **Occupy Madison Tiny Houses**. For one “tiny house” for a homeless person who contributes “sweat equity,” in Madison, Wis.
- \$10,000 pledge to the **city of Madison**, contingent on city approval of a proposal to put permanent lockers for the homeless in or near downtown.
- \$2,500: **Second Harvest Foodbank** of Southern Wisconsin.
- \$20,000: **World Food Program USA**, designated for Syrian relief.

FFRF’s legal
accomplishments – 2015

FFRF logged just under 5,000 requests for help to end state/church violations from the public! (All complainants received educational responses.) FFRF’s five staff attorneys, with intern help, sent out **1,186 formal complaint letters** to public officials in 2015, achieving a whopping **241 total victories** (with more to come). That total doesn’t include follow-up letters, open records requests, or mass mailings, such as 420 letters to Wisconsin superintendents regarding vouchers.

Top 10 states (with the most state/church violations): 1. Texas 2. Florida 3. Alabama 4. Illinois 5. Wisconsin 6. Missouri 7. Oklahoma 8. Ohio 9. California 10. Georgia

Top 10 issue areas: 1. Violations in public schools. 2. In God We Trust. 3. Miscellaneous. 4. Religious Displays 5. Nativities 6. Crosses 7. Funding 8. Government Prayer 9. Legislation 10. Legislative Prayer

FFRF had **180** school victories, including halting: prayer or praying faculty in **40** public school; school board prayer in **5** districts; **12** bible distributions on school grounds plus removing **22** religious displays from public schools.

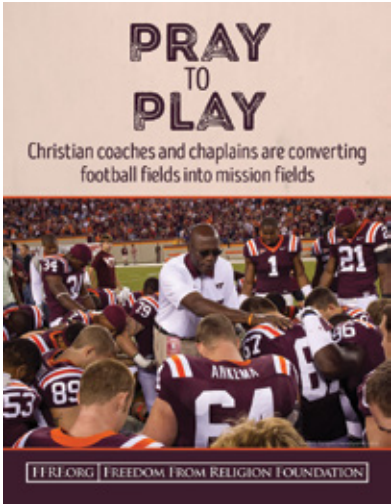
FFRF removed **5** crosses from public property; **7** other religious displays from public property (including “Jesus Loves You” sign in Hawkins, Texas).

Five victories stopped public funding of religion (including city sponsorship of a Gospel Fest in Jonesboro, Ga., and rescinding of a \$3,000 grant from Covington County, Ala., to a Baptist ministry).

- Among notable victories:
- Portland schools stopped school concerts at the Grotto (Roman Catholic) shrine.

- University of Florida added a Thomas Paine quote to a new building.
- Norfolk State University included a secular message at its Founder’s Day event.
- Coral Springs and Deerfield Beach, Fla., dropped invocations from city meetings.
- Chanute Schools (Kansas) removed a Jesus painting from a public school.
- “Bible Man” was ousted from Grundy County Schools, Tenn.

FFRF’s legal team issued a “pray to play” exposé condemning more than 25 public universities for allowing football coaches to impose their personal religion on players by hiring Christian chaplains. The report, released in August, involved more than a year of work and research by **Staff Attorneys Andrew Seidel, Patrick Elliott** and interns.



The cover of FFRF’s ‘Pray to Play’ report.

FFRF 2015 lawsuit victories!

- Michigan.** FFRF and member plaintiff Douglas Marshall (named **FFRF’s 2015 Freethinker of the Year**) won our challenge in Warren, Mich., taken with Americans United and the ACLU of Michigan. A federal district court approved a settlement requiring the city to give Doug equal access to city hall. His “reason station” now balances a longstanding church “prayer station” in the city atrium.
- Florida.** FFRF, our Central Florida Freethought Community chapter and plaintiff David Williamson won the right to unfettered distribution of freethought literature to balance a bible table in Orange County (Fla.) public schools. The school board adopted an even-handed policy, then closed the forum altogether!
- Pennsylvania.** In August, U.S. District Judge Terrence McVerry found in our favor against a Ten Commandments monument at a junior high in Connellsville Area School District. On Oct. 9, the monument was removed from public school property, ending the 3-year-old suit. A twin challenge in New Kensington, Pa., in which the same judge ruled a parent and high school student lacked standing to challenge a decalog in front of the high school, is on appeal.
- Indiana.** FFRF, with the ACLU of Indiana and two local plaintiffs, sued Franklin County over a nativity scene at its courthouse in Brookville. The county opened it up as a public forum, then refused FFRF’s solstice displays (necessitating a second



Banished to private property



Chris Line photo

FFRF current staff photographed by solstice displays at Wisconsin capitol

lawsuit), then agreed to the displays. After FFRF’s banner was stolen (twice!), the city of Brookville, which owned the crèche, announced it will move it to private property in the future.

- Georgia.** FFRF settled a federal lawsuit against Emanuel County Schools, which inflicted daily prayer and pressure on FFRF’s kindergarten and first grade plaintiffs. Emanuel teachers received educational training, the primary offending teachers no longer work in the district, and the Doe family was financially compensated.

New litigation filed: Florida: Working with Americans United, ACLU and ACLU of Florida, FFRF filed suit in July against the Brevard County Board of County Commissioners, for rejecting atheists, humanists and nontheists from delivering opening messages at governmental meetings. **Indiana:** FFRF, the ACLU and the ACLU of Indiana filed suit in October to halt an annual live nativity enactment at Concord High School in Elkhart, Ind., with a parent and student plaintiffs. FFRF won a preliminary injunction to halt the live nativity and the case proceeds. **New Jersey:** FFRF and its member David Steketee filed suit in December against Morris County in state court over egregious public funding of church repairs.

Outreach – Campus and
freethought events

FFRF staff made 43 appearances. **Co-President Dan Barker** spoke at 29 events in 16 states, including 4 debates, 7 FFRF chapter events (Northern Ohio, Sacramento, Denver, Albuquerque, twice in Chicago and Duluth), several local or regional meetings, such as CFI Indianapolis, Ethical Humanist Society in Skokie, N.J. Humanists, and at 7 college campuses. He addressed 5 conferences, including in Cologne, Germany, **with Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor**. She had six other events: Texas Secular Convention, campuses in Portland (co-sponsored by FFRF’s chapter), Northern Illinois University, and Georgetown, and spoke to Americans United chapter, Rochester, N.Y.

FFRF Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert spoke at the Orange County (Calif.) Freethought Alliance. **Staff Attorneys Sam Grover** and **Maddy Ziegler** presented at the Secular Student Alliance’s annual Cleveland conference. Sam spoke at the Southwest Secular Student Conference in Claremont, Calif. **Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott** spoke, along with **Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel**, at Freethought Festival 4. Andrew, with Dan, appeared at Freethought Florida Conference. Andrew spoke to a University of Arkansas student club.

Chapters: FFRF has 20 current chapters run by hardworking volunteers. Look for one in your area:

ffrf.org/about/ffrf-chapters

2015 Office/Staff/Board

FFRF’s Executive Board of Directors are: **Dan Barker** (co-president, half a vote), **Jim Bredeson**, secretary; **Pat Cleveland**, director at large; **Joseph Cunningham**, director at large; **Annie Laurie Gaylor** (co-president, half a vote), **Stephen Hirtle**, chair, **Todd Peissig**, director at large, **Steve Salemsen**, treasurer, **James Zerwick**, director at large, and **Mike Cermak**, director at large.

Our staff of 17 is overseen by **Lisa Strand**, director of operations. We said goodbye to longtime employee **Katie Daniel** and welcomed new bookkeeper **Eleanor McEntee**. We also said goodbye to **Charlotte Stein** and **Dayna Long** and welcomed as new director of “first impressions” **Lisa Treu** and new assistant **Alysa Schaefer**. Our first graphic designer, working part-time, is talented **Jake Swenson**. **Takara Scott-Johnston** and **Bekki Huelsman** provided part-time student support. **Cheryl Becker** and **Stephanie Moritz** came out of library retirement to oversee cataloging of the new library.

Legal staffing. Joining FFRF’s five staff attorneys (**Rebecca Markert, Patrick Elliott, Andrew Seidel, Liz Cavell** and **Sam Grover**) in handling legal complaints over state/church entanglements in 2015 is super-capable **Calli Miller**. FFRF debuted FFRF’s first legal fellowships: the **Diane Uhl Legal Fellowship**, filled by new attorney **Ryan Jayne** (a spring 2015 legal extern from Lewis and Clark Law School) and the **Cornelius Vanderbroek Legal Fellowship**, filled by **Maddy Ziegler**, a UW-Madison law school grad who’s also worked as legal publicist. **Katherine Paige** completed her legal fellowship, funded by William & Mary Law School.

Other interns and externs: **Jarvis Idowu** (University of Wisconsin-Madison Law School); **Liana Kapeke-Dale, Chris Line, Neal Fitzgerald**, (both UW-Madison), **Seth Wrinkle** (Lewis and Clark Law School in Oregon). Two undergrads interns: **Bekki Huelsman**, UW-Madison, and **Adam Grudman**, University of Maryland.

Volunteers. FFRF thanks student essay readers **Jeff Brinkman, Tom Brock, Chuck Hoorstra, Dan Kettner, Bob Ramsdell, Linda Josheff, Sue Schuetz, Anita Weier** (all Madison, Wis., area). Sue and Linda, who are sisters, also help with office work, as does versatile Board Member **Todd Peissig**, who volunteers a day every six weeks. Convention volunteers were **Eric Lawrence, Jessica Kopish** and **Beth Taylor**.



Taslima Nasrin



Ingrid Laas photos
Ernie Chambers

39th convention in Pittsburgh

FFRF’s 38th annual national convention in Madison, Wis., attracted about 600 participants from 39 states (plus the District of Columbia), Australia, Canada and Uganda in October. Notably, we had a first, as Madison **Mayor Paul Soglin** welcomed us. Notable activists, authors and “unabashed atheists” and freethinkers spoke, including “Emperor Has No Clothes” honorees **Nebraska State Sen. Ernie Chambers** and “woman without a country” **Taslima Nasrin**, under a death fatwa from “holy men” in Bangladesh.

Mark your calendar now for the **39th annual FFRF convention at the Wyndham Grand Pittsburgh Downtown Hotel**, Pittsburgh, Pa., the weekend of **Oct. 7-9, 2016**. There’s an option pre-convention side trip to Frank Lloyd Wright’s **Fallingwater**. More details will follow.



Lauryn Seering photo

FFRF attorneys Sam Grover, Liz Cavell, Rebecca Markert, Patrick Elliott, and Andrew Seidel

In the news

Christians have the most abortions

Despite strong anti-abortion stances, many U.S. churches have very little influence on women who are seeking abortions, according to a recent survey.

A survey done by LifeWay, a Christian research group, shows that 70% of women who had abortions indicated their religious preference is Christian, including 25% who are Catholic.

According to the survey, 76% of the 1,038 women surveyed said the church had no bearing on their decision. Only 7% discussed their abortion decision with someone at church.

Other findings: Nearly two-thirds (65%) say church members judge single women who are pregnant.

A majority (54%) think churches oversimplify decisions about pregnancy options.

Only 41% believe churches are prepared to help with decisions about unwanted pregnancies.

Only 30% think churches give accurate advice about pregnancy options.

Mayor swears by Constitution, not bible

After being reelected as mayor of Franklin, N.C., Bob Scott opted to get sworn in on a copy of the U.S. Constitution, rather than on the bible, like he had done when he was first elected to the office.

“I’ve thought about it for a long time,” Scott told WLOS News in Asheville. “But I was talking to [Franklin town manager] Summer the other day and said I’m thinking about taking this oath on the Constitution. I realized we are taking an oath to defend the Constitution, pure and simple, and those are the laws of the land. And if I’m gonna give an oath, that’s what I’m giving an oath to. It had nothing to do with religion — for or against — just swearing to protect and defend the Constitution.”

Zuism makes comeback in Iceland

Nearly 1% of Iceland’s population now considers themselves Zuists, a religion that worships ancient Sumerian gods, according to The Guardian.

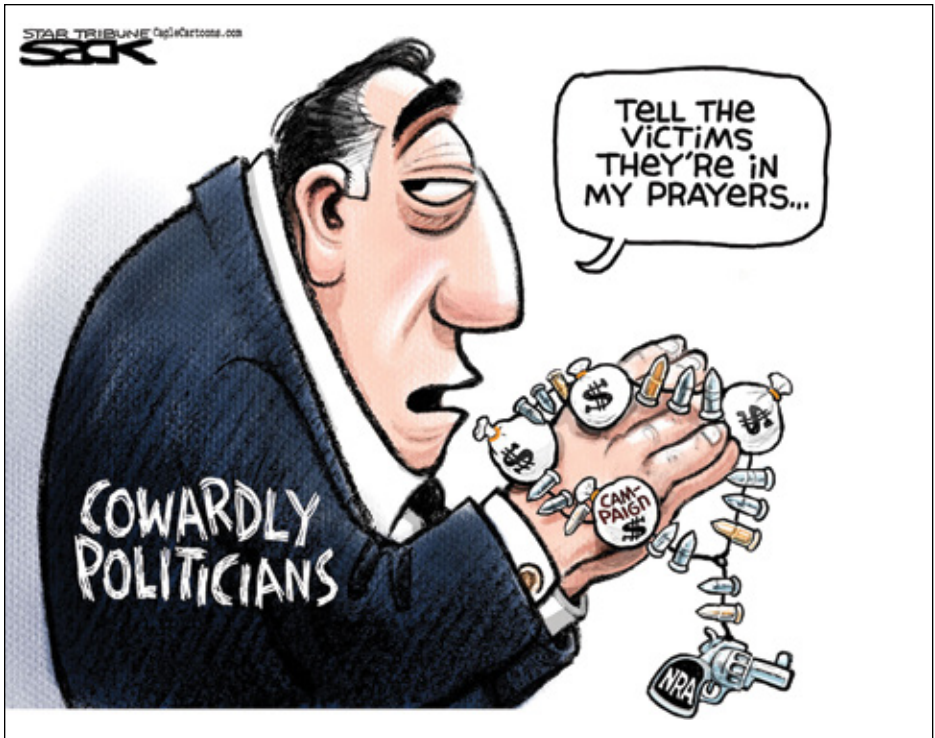
But it’s not necessarily the Sumerian gods who are getting the attention, but rather a promised tax rebate.

In the past month, more than 3,100 Icelanders have protested paying part of their taxes to the state church by becoming Zuists. They will be refunded the taxes earmarked for religion, which is about \$80 per person per year. Those who register as Zuists will then be unregistered from the National Church of Iceland, and will get the refund of their “parish fees.”

“Zuists would like to abolish government funding to religious organizations in the form of parish fees and believe that the ‘state should stop gathering data on the personal religious beliefs of Icelanders,’” the Iceland Monitor reports.

UK: Get Christianity out of public

With almost half of the United Kingdom population now identifying as non-religious, a commission calls for Christianity to be removed from the public sphere.



The commission, which included leading religious leaders from many faiths, decided in its report that faith schools are “socially divisive” and that selection of kids based on their beliefs should be ended.

The report was quickly denounced by the Church of England, which said the report was “hijacked by humanists.” Cabinet ministers also condemned the report, saying it is “seriously misguided.”

The report notes the decline in Christian affiliation, now around 40%, the increase in the number of people with non-religious beliefs and identities, and the increase in the number of people of non-Christian affiliation.

Banning of book reading backfires

The conservative Liberty Counsel law firm forced the Mount Horeb Area School District in Wisconsin to cancel a reading and discussion of a book about a teen’s gender transition.

In November, the Liberty Counsel had threatened to sue the district, claiming the event would violate parents’ constitutional right “to direct the upbringing of their children.”

The reading was initially set to take place at an elementary school, which has a student who identifies as a trans girl. The reading of “I Am Jazz,” co-written by trans teen Jazz Jennings, was intended to educate students.

But then in early December, a student-led group did an early-morning reading of the book outside the high school, where about 200 people were in attendance. That was followed that night by a reading at the public library, where 600 people showed up. The following Monday, the Mount Horeb School Board unanimously approved new rules to accommodate transgender students. Two attorneys representing FFRF spoke before the vote.

Pope’s visit cost Philly \$8 million

The city of Philadelphia spent \$17 million on the visit of Pope Francis in September, but has only sent a bill to the World Meeting of Families seeking about \$9 million, according to the Allentown Morning Call. That means the city is on the hook for about \$8 million for the visit of the head of the Catholic Church.

While no money was directly tied to religious activities, according to

Mayor Michael Nutter, taxpayers of all backgrounds in Philadelphia are on the hook for the pope’s visit. Most of the money went for police and fire protection.

Staks Roach writes in skepticink.com, “It isn’t like the Vatican doesn’t have the money. They could and should easily pay the \$17 million. Do you know what isn’t good for families? Forcing the City to pay for their Pope out of the pockets of public education. The truth is that the World Meeting of Families doesn’t give a damn about children or families. They just care about pushing the Catholic religion. It is bad enough that they don’t have to actually pay taxes, but now they are taking our taxes away from the City and families who need it. It is immoral, illegal, and unconstitutional.”

Death sentence overturned

After a prosecutor in a murder trial quoted the bible to make the case for the death penalty, a judge recently overturned a 1992 sentence, according to a Dec. 8 report in the San Diego Union-Tribune.

In December, U.S. District Judge Jeffrey Miller said the references and quotes of biblical law were used so much by Deputy District Attorney James Koerber that it affected the outcome of the trial of Rudolph Roybal. Roybal was originally sentenced to death in 1992 for the killing of neighbor Yvonne Weden.

During closing arguments, Koerber told jurors: “There is another book, written long ago, that mentions the crime of murder, and mentions what is the appropriate penalty for the crime of murder, and that book says a couple of different things. It says, ‘Thou shalt not steal.’ It says, ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ And it says ‘And if he smite with an instrument of iron so that he die, he is a murderer. The murderer shall surely be put to death.’”

“It’s an appeal to an authority or other evidence that shouldn’t be considered by the jury,” said Alex Simpson, a professor at California Western School of Law. “In reality, the only thing a jury should do is consider what are the facts and how do the facts inform my decision to vote one way or the other.”

The ruling means Roybal can be granted a new penalty phase trial or be resented to life without possibility of parole.

Wheaton prof suspended over comments

Larycia Hawkins, a political science professor at the Christian Wheaton College in Illinois, has been suspended after asserting that the Christian god and the god of Islam are the same. The Christian professor also wore a Muslim head covering “during the weeks before Christmas in solidarity with Muslims facing religious discrimination,” reported The New York Times.

Hawkins wrote on her Facebook page: “I stand in religious solidarity with Muslims because they, like me, a Christian, are people of the book. And as Pope Francis stated last week, we worship the same God.”

On Dec. 16, the college sent out a press release explaining that Hawkins had been placed on administrative leave. Wheaton President Philip G. Ryken said that it was Hawkins’ words, not dress or appearance, which caused the suspension.

“Some recent faculty statements have generated confusion about complex theological matters, and could be interpreted as failing to reflect the distinctively Christian theological identity of Wheaton College,” the press release stated.

It pays to complain

A letter to the director of the Buffalo Veterans Medical Center in New York by an FFRF member has resulted in the removal of a bible and religious-themed poster in a glass-encased display in the main entrance of the facility.

“As a veteran who served eight years of active duty with two honorable discharges and several commendations, and who has been an atheist since the age of 16, I was deeply offended,” the member, who wishes to remain anonymous, wrote to FFRF. “I realized I needed to take responsibility [for writing a letter], since it was I who was most directly affected by this egregious misuse of government speech.”

The complainant says the display was “odd-looking” and included a small dining table with white tablecloth, on which several items were placed, including a bible. Behind the table was a poster on the wall explaining what each item meant, claiming that the bible “represents faith in a Higher Power and pledge to our country, founded as one Nation under God.”

After sending the letter to the hospital director, he was surprised at the quick results. “Well, after checking in at the hospital today, I am very pleased to report that the bible is now gone and the poster has been rewritten to exclude all references to God and religion!”

What Is a Freethinker?

freethinker *n.*

1 A person who forms opinions about religion on the basis of reason, independently of tradition, authority, or established belief.

2015 Brian Bolton Graduate or ‘Older’ College Essay Contest winners

FFRF awards \$8,650 to student essayists

FFRF congratulates the eight graduate or “older” (ages 25-30) college students who won last year’s essay competition. FFRF has offered essay competitions to college students since 1979, high school students since 1994 and graduate students since 2010.

Students were asked to write 750 to 950 words on the topic of “Religion and violence: What is to blame for religious terrorism?” Recipients, scholarship amounts and schools are:

First place: **Candace Kotulski**, 30,

Arizona State University (\$3,000)

Second place: **Benjamin Schwartz**, 24, Columbia University (\$2,000)

Third place: **Alex Flitter**, 26, Rutgers University (\$1,000)

Fourth place: **Emilee Prado**, 26, University of Denver (\$750)

Fifth place: **Peter D.A. Wood**, 27, Florida State University (\$500)

Sixth place: **Tara Clifford**, 30, Marywood University (\$400)

Honorable mentions (\$200) each:

Sara Rose, 26, Oregon State University

Samuel David Capps, 29, Cornell University

“Our scholarships for students are FFRF’s investment in the future of freethought,” said Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “There are thousands of scholarships rewarding orthodoxy and hardly any rewarding critical thinking

and the use of reason in evaluating religious claims.”

The competition is generously endowed by Brian Bolton, a Lifetime Member who is a retired psychologist, humanist minister and professor emeritus at the University of Arkansas.

FFRF also thanks Dean and Dorea Schramm of Florida for providing a \$100 bonus to students who are members of a secular student club or the Secular Student Alliance. The total of \$8,650 reflects bonuses.

First place: Brian Bolton graduate student college essay contest

The role of religion in terrorism

FFRF awarded Candace \$3,000.

By Candace Kotulski

The motivation behind religious terrorism is complex, rooted in the psyche of the individual and the society they are born into. In America, we find it comforting to acquit religion as a potential source of such violence and death. We whitewash the contents of holy books and their history to fit our concept of religion as peaceful and positive at best, harmless at worst. We attribute religious terrorism to the twisted minds of lunatics.

But there is no force in the world as potent as religion in the minds of its followers. From the passages that condone slavery and genocide to the social norms created in churches and temples worldwide, the very fabric of religion is woven to encourage atrocities in its name.

Despite the American view of religion as loving and peaceful, there are many passages contained in the texts of the Judeo-Christian religions that call for the destruction of all other belief systems. Referring to a town of foreigners with different beliefs, a verse such as Deut. 13:13-19 NLT states that “you must attack that town and completely destroy all its inhabitants, as well as all the livestock.” This passage, and many others like it, shows that Judeo-Christian holy books directly order the decimation of those who do not follow their particular deity. Even Jesus states, in Matthew 10:34, “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

Directives to kill the nonbelievers are powerful, but the psychological aspects of religion hold the key to understanding the foundations of religious terrorism. For many, indoctrination into a religion begins at a young age, when the person is incapable of distinguishing fact from fiction or thinking in a logical and analytical manner. Children are regaled with stories of their deity designed to instill awe and terror in order to ensure obedience. Stories such as Noah and Jonah provide a framework of cognition designed to discourage dissension.

Religion exploits the human tendency toward in-group/out-group mentality. We prefer to think of the world in terms of “us” and “them.”



Candace Kotulski

This tribal mentality served us well in our evolutionary past, but the vestiges of it are seen in the fierce loyalty people feel toward the groups they associate with and the hostility they express toward opposing groups.

Though the Christian bible lists several out-groups, the group with the most mandates for violence are nonbelievers and followers of other religions. This is seen in blatant calls for violence, but it is also present in the stories and parables peppering the text. Stories such as that of Noah contain an underlying theme that those who do not serve God are deserving of death. This binary and simplistic worldview easily dehumanizes and demonizes entire groups of people.

Central to Judeo-Christian religions is the notion that our lives are followed by another life, one that is pleasant for the in-group and full of pain and misery for the out-group. This preys on people’s fear of death and causes the believer to strive toward attaining their admission into the nirvana of the after-life, regardless of cost.

If the purpose of this life is to please a deity in order to secure a place among the privileged few, it is meaningless for the nonbeliever and useful only in a utilitarian sense for the believer. Thus, the ending of this life is significant only as the transformation from the human world to the ethereal world of the divine. Rather than being a solemn and final act, death becomes trivialized and ending it becomes far more palatable.

Unquestioning submission

The power in religion to fuel terrorism lies largely in its message that people are merely an instrument of

God. A verse such as “Give yourselves completely to God, for you were dead, but now you have new life. So use your whole body as an instrument to do what is right for the glory of God” (Romans 6:13) is saying that a person must completely surrender their will to God because they owe him for the “new life” they enjoy. This creates an entire population of people who are groomed from a young age to submit unquestioningly to a religious leader chosen by “God.” All that is needed is a charismatic leader to take the wheel and transform that group from average people to terrorists convinced of their divine mandate to kill.

One of the staples of Judeo-Christian religion is that it holds a unique truth that no other religion or belief system can hold. There are no concessions for other worldviews or even other versions of the same belief system. This stance of holding a mental monopoly on “truth” and being threatened by any contradictory idea results in devotees who do not understand concepts outside of their own belief system and actively fight against anything foreign to them.

These facets of modern religion coalesce into an environment in which religious terrorism flourishes. A person raised in this environment is taught from birth that the out-group deserves torture and death and there is divine justification for punishing evil. Throughout their lives, knowledge is denigrated as wicked and blind faith is encouraged. They believe life on

All it takes is a spark to ignite the fire that religion has carefully cultivated.

this planet is something fleeting and insignificant in the grand scheme of a promised blissful eternity. This person is a tinder box. All it takes is a spark to ignite the fire that religion has carefully cultivated.

From a massive strike like that of Sept. 11, 2001, to an abortion doctor who is gunned down outside his or her office, the act of violence may be the choice of the individual, but the predisposition and justification for it emanate directly from religion.

“I am a 30-year-old student at Arizona State University about to graduate with a B.A. in psychology. I belong to the local chapter of the Secular Student Alliance. I currently live in Cottonwood, Ariz., but I was born on Sept. 26, 1984, in Alabama. I am fascinated by the psychology and sociology of religion and I hope to investigate the roots and appeal of religion as a social institution. I would also like to investigate the psychology of religious leaders, particularly those who lead violent religious groups, as well as the psychology of their followers. Understanding the roots of these movements will assist psychologists in helping those who are attempting to disentangle themselves from such groups.”

Tune in to

≡≡≡

FREETHOUGHT RADIO

≡≡≡

Your weekly antidote to the religious right

BROADCASTS AND STREAMS

SATURDAYS AT 11 A.M. CENTRAL

PROGRESSIVE TALK THE MIC 92.1 FM | MADISON, WI

AND OVER SEVERAL OTHER STATIONS

ITUNES OR PODCASTS ARCHIVED AT

FFRF.ORG/NEWS/RADIO

PRODUCED BY THE FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

HOSTED BY DAN BARKER AND ANNIE LAURIE GAYLOR

Slightly irreverent views, news, music and interviews

Second place: Graduate student college essay contest

Nothing to fear but faith itself

FFRF awarded Benjamin \$2,000.

By Benjamin Schwartz

Whenever religious terrorists make headlines, commentators perform all manner of mental gymnastics to assure us that the violence is aberrational, completely divorced from the belief system that its propagators would argue not only condoned their acts of murder, but commanded them. Scholars such as Jessica Stern and Ariel Glucklich echo President Obama’s claim that violence indicates a “perversion” of its culprit’s faith. Violence, however, is no perversion of faith — nor does it stem from one faith in particular. (Those on the far right who decry Islam as a religion of violence ignore the prolific, bloodthirsty legacy of Christians, Jews, Hindus, etc., from the Spanish Inquisition to Baruch Goldstein.) Rather, history teaches us that violence is a direct result and unavoidable consequence of the most unpardonable, amoral, inextricable aspect of religion: faith itself.

This argument is hugely inflammatory to most religious adherents (“people of faith”), yet it should come as no surprise. When we expand our scope from religious violence to the history of mass acts of evil more broadly, faith in the infallibility of a heroic individual or political system is constantly at the root of systemic violence. (Often this faith is likened to a “cult” of personality, which derives from the Latin word for “worship.”) Within such regimes, every utterance and piece of pageantry consciously reinforces the belief that the state contains the single correct answer to all questions of comportment, morality and law, and thus that any action committed by the state is by definition justifiable. This absolutist “faith” is decried in the context of secular leaders and political regimes — especially those that commit acts of violence — but vehemently defended when it comes in the guise of religion.



Benjamin Schwartz

In fact, quite far from being decried or even questioned, faith is the most valorized virtue within almost every religious doctrine. In the fundamental texts of monotheism, it is absolute fealty to the deity’s whims that makes one the most moral, worthy and, ultimately, successful. Look no further than Abraham, the fundamental figure of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, three faiths that today count nearly 4 billion followers between them, who is blessed beyond all others in large part because of his willingness to kill his only son on the vague orders of an unseen voice. According to the biblical passage, Abraham’s virtue resides in his “fear” of the Lord, which outweighs his “love” of his son (Genesis 22: 1-12). This heinous moral logic can be reflected today in the hierarchical nature of the three monotheistic faiths, which demand their followers supersede their own desire, will and logical faculties to the impregnable pronouncements of the Lord no matter how horrific they may be. It should come as no surprise that zealots are willing to kill other people’s children because of a perceived imperative from their God when “mainstream” people of faith celebrate Abraham for the only thing that could be more monstrous: a willingness to kill

his own. Though we most often think of religious violence in terms of bombings and shootings, most of the violence done by religion takes the form of unseen crimes that depend upon the perpetrator’s position of authority in regard to the victim. It is fitting that the fundamental figure in Western religion is a would-be child murderer, considering the pervasive nature of crimes against children within Abrahamic faiths. Unlike suicide bombers, child rapists do not argue that there is an explicit justification for their actions within their holy text — yet faith is no less to blame. It is faith in the rectitude of the clergy cultivated in children from birth that puts them in danger.

Likewise it is adults’ faith that spreading the pronouncements of an imaginary God is more important than the very real lives of victims that creates the pervasive, systematized cover-ups that occur all over the world. Multiple times, religious leaders were willing to defend colleagues accused of rape even after those accusations were made public. “That’s not our job to judge,” says one Protestant reverend, stoically. “It’s the Lord’s job.” Or, to put it even more bluntly, as Cardinal Roger Mahoney of Los Angeles wrote when discussing his decision not to expose a rapist priest, “We could open up yet another fire storm — and it takes us years to recover from those.”

Religious violence will end when we cease to valorize “faith,” and instead recognize it as an abjection of our most meaningful and most beautifully human functions: the ability to reason, empathize, and ultimately decide on matters of right and wrong, just and unjust, true and false, for ourselves. Faith’s demand that we subvert our own faculties to the dictums of flawed humans or imaginary deities is the ultimate form of religious violence: The schism between the observable universe and the dogma that must be accepted unerringly on faith causes pain and anguish more frequently than we

It should come as no surprise that zealots are willing to kill other people’s children because of a perceived imperative from their God when “mainstream” people of faith celebrate Abraham for the only thing that could be more monstrous: a willingness to kill his own.

can possibly understand or analyze. The violence and terror spawned by religion — whether by that we mean suicide attacks, systematized cover-ups of abuse, or simply the mental anguish of holding dusty tautologies to be truer than what our own logical and emotional capacities lead us to believe — will continue until faith, and, with it, religion itself, is a point of embarrassment in our society, not one of pride.

“I was born in Fairfield, Conn., the son of a deeply devout Catholic mother and a Jewish father. I graduated from Brown University with a degree in American Studies, which I decided to put to proper use as a teacher in a new middle school in the Bridgeport, Conn., school district. I am in a master’s degree program in English and comparative literature at Columbia University in New York. I expect to finish my degree in May 2016 and hope to return to the field of education before eventually going on to pursue my Ph.D. I hope to continue to use my voice to vociferously protest with every ounce of my being the forces of ignorance, repression and bigotry in American life, particularly those voices who attempt to hide behind the cloak of faith.”

Third place: Graduate student college essay contest

What could possibly be the cause of religious terrorism?

FFRF awarded Alex \$1,000.

By Alex Flitter

Let’s say I’m a Communist. But not just a Communist, a devout and reverent Communist. Reading the Communist Manifesto daily brings relief, peace and direction to my life. I believe in the book so much that I take every word literally. Moreover, I live my life trying my best to emulate the words and actions of Marx. Now let’s say there are other people who call themselves Communists, but they have a much more allegorical take on the Communist Manifesto. They preach that Marx didn’t mean that an actual revolution was necessary, but rather a revolution within ourselves. That the bourgeoisie and the proletariat were simply metaphors for the dif-

ferences in opinions that people have, and that Marx was actually calling for more understanding among people when he called for a classless society. Now, these allegorical Communists could possibly be more in touch with reality than I am. And they could very well be better people. But simply put, I would be the more faithful Communist. If I were to commit an unspeakable act to advance the aims of communism, would it be realistic to say that “people are responsible for violence and terrorism” and not the ideology that inspired me? (Just for the record, Mr. Senator, I’m not a Communist.) I understand why President Obama said, regarding ISIS, that “no religion is responsible for terrorism. People are responsible for violence and terrorism,” and I recognize that he needs very religious countries to take the lead on combating ISIS. But understanding his rationale doesn’t mean he’s not



Alex Flitter

being intentionally myopic. To hear the president and many others tell the story of religious terrorism, it’s that terrorists use the guise of religion to promote their nonreligious hate and destruction. I suppose I could buy that

rationale, if not for the fact that, when interviewed, terrorists or supporters of terrorism directly quote their religious texts to back up their noxious beliefs. In his first statement offering rationale for why he planted bombs in the Atlanta Centennial Olympic Park, Christian terrorist Eric Rudolph quoted a passage from the bible (Psalms 144:1). When ISIS distributed a pamphlet describing the proper protocol for how to treat children and women as slaves, they offered a direct quote from the Quran (23: 5-6). When leader of al-Qaeda Ayman al-Zawahiri released his classic page-turner “Jihad, Martyrdom and the Killing of Innocents,” he directly quotes passages from the Sunnah and Haddith to justify martyrdom and the murder of innocents. This seems to cause cognitive dissonance among the majority of the religious that don’t commit atrocities. Continued on the next page

Fourth place: Graduate student college essay contest

The fundamental link between religion and violence

FFRF awarded Emily \$750.

By Emilee Prado

Some people argue that religion cannot be held responsible for violence in its name. However, I believe that violence is fundamentally linked to both Islam and Christianity. Of course, religious violence is not confined to these religions but, for lucidity and brevity, this essay will limit its scope.

Today, perhaps the most recognized religious terrorism comes from the Middle East in the form of a group called the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). ISIS follows the teachings of Islam and supports terrorism as a way of achieving its religious goals. Another example of a radical terrorist group is The Army of God. This group is made up of Christians who support acts of terrorism on those who are not aligned with their beliefs. Labeled “extremist,” these two groups are often thought not to represent their religions as a whole. However, it is clear that although they are radicalized in their beliefs, all forms of religious terrorism, as the term suggests, have underpinnings in religion and cannot be separated from it. Religious terrorists are extremists who share the same foundations with others of their religion while taking Islam or Christianity to its plausible extents. Despite concurrent messages of peace, violence is an intrinsic part of these religions, and can only be stopped by emphasizing universal tolerance among religions.

It is important to look at examples from the Quran and the bible in order to investigate how violence and religion are connected. It is clear how religious terrorists are not “perverting” their religion, but rather embodying it. A passage in the Quran reads, “Kill them whenever you confront them and



Emilee Prado

drive them out from where they drove you out. (For though killing is sinful) wrongful persecution is even worse than killing . . .” (Surah 2.191). Justice and retribution of past injustices are at the heart of this passage. The radical group ISIS takes Allah’s directions literally and it kills as punishment for prior wrongful persecution. People who do not directly oppose Islam can be seen as innocent bystanders in the eyes of many outside ISIS. However, this group largely follows the “If you’re not with us, you’re against us” manner of thinking. Although this is a logical fallacy, it is a common human point of view to see life in these terms. Moreover, this method of exacting justice is at the heart of the Quran and proves to be a direct tie between violence and religion.

According to the bible, thousands of years ago, God destroyed nearly all human life on the planet as a punishment for failure to heed him as a divine being (Genesis 6-9). In the story of Noah’s flood, God himself commits violent acts and commands destruction. As one of the oldest stories in Western religion, the flood provides an intrinsic connection between religion and violence, a demand for justice, and a direct killing of innocent

people in God’s name. According to the God in the bible, these people were not innocent; they were wicked sinners who deserved the consequence of death. However, a secular look at the story of the flood reveals someone who slaughtered humans as a castigation for not aligning themselves with his beliefs. It also perhaps counters President Obama’s argument that “no god condones the killing of innocents.” Although later God promised never to flood the earth again, what he did was seen by him and his followers as a righteous act.

Killing to overcome wrongful persecution in the Quran and killing as a punishment for wicked ways in the bible are two instances of virtuous murder. Respectively, these are the very same precedents that are at the core of both ISIS and The Army of God. Believing wrongful persecution is worse than killing, followers of ISIS have no qualms about committing terrorist attacks if they are doing it for these reasons. Similarly, The Army of God seeks to punish the wicked, as God commands, by sanctioning the murders of abortionists. Both of these extremist organizations therefore embody the violent acts of Allah or God. Extremists may not represent the majority of those who share their religion, but they often directly follow Allah or God’s example on how to punish those who do not share in their religious beliefs.

Teachings of peace and non-violence are also found in the fundamentals of Islam and Christianity. When there are clear calls to violence through commands and examples, alongside clear calls to peace, it is up to the individual which path to follow. Pacifists choose one way and religious terrorists choose another.

After seeing how deeply rooted violence is within Islam and Christianity, it becomes clear that violence and religion are intertwined in a compli-

Extremists may not represent the majority of those who share their religion, but they often directly follow Allah or God’s example on how to punish those who do not share in their religious beliefs.

cated meshwork. Perhaps then, in an effort to thwart religions terrorism, we can preach non-exclusive religion. Both Islam and Christianity present a “them” who oppose an “us.” This can be changed by deconstructing these boundaries and emphasizing universal tolerance. We should recognize that, taken as a whole, both Islam and Christianity are flawed and we should accept them as such. Moreover, if we extract the positive messages of love and peace from these religions, those who seek it can have a spiritual basis that is not overseen by a religious figure whom both tolerates and commands violence.

Emilee was born in Littleton, Colo. and is 25 years old. She received a bachelor’s degree in Film Studies from the University of Colorado at Boulder in 2013. Emilee is in her first year of graduate school at the University of Denver where she will be working toward an MFA in creative writing. She is expecting to graduate in the spring of 2017 and hopes to use her degree to help further her career as a writer and a novelist. Emilee is a member of the Secular Student Alliance and believes that creativity and freedom of personal expression are essentials to all human life.

Alex Flitter essay

Continued from the previous page

They are unable to reconcile how books that bring them joy and peace could drive many to kill. But one read-through of any of the central religious texts makes it clear how such a discrepancy can arise.

This is because the holy books of the major Western religions are remarkably bipolar, interspersed with countless messages of both love and hate at a rapid pace. The very same book of the New Testament calls for gay men to be punished (Romans 1:27) and then later encourages one to live peacefully with all men (Romans 12:18). The Quran praises those who do good deeds and notes the forgiveness of God (9:91). But that very same chapter also calls for people who worship a different god (idolaters) to be murdered or forced to convert (9:5).

Therefore, religious scripture is often a veritable “choose your own adventure” book. If a religious person has an inclination to help people and be kind to others, they can find justification to act that way. And if a religious person has an inclination toward bigotry and supremacism, they can certainly find justification as well. But when a person does the latter, they’re not contorting

peaceful religious passages to suit their abhorrent objectives. They are reading the hateful passages word for word and disregarding common sense and common decency because they believe that it is the literal word of God.

It may come as a surprise after this little diatribe that I really don’t hate religion. I’m not so petty as to ignore the positive actions that have been done in the name of religion. I don’t overlook the money amassed and the hours volunteered for worthwhile causes that were inspired by faith. I’m also willing to acknowledge that, thankfully, religious terrorists consist of only a small fraction of those who follow their religion and aren’t representative of those groups. But if a nonreligious person is willing to admit these things, isn’t it time for the religious community to admit the truth about religious terrorism to themselves?

In every ideology, the more literalistic and strident a person’s passion is, the more pure they are to that ideology. But most ideologies are malleable and evolve over time. However, most religions are centered around texts that are thousands of years old and are supposed to contain the literal word of God. Luckily, the majority of the religious are selectively ignoring the passages containing brutality that didn’t

“Religious scripture is often a veritable ‘choose your own adventure’ book.”

belong in the 8th century, let alone the 21st century. But some aren’t.

It’s gotten to a point where after every violent act perpetrated by a religious terrorist, we go into “No True Scotsman” mode, in which we wish away the culpability of religion by convincing ourselves that it’s just that one bad egg, and not the religion, that’s the problem. But it’s also gotten to the

point where we have hundreds of thousands of bad eggs in just the past few decades. It’s time for those who only praise the good religion brings while willfully ignoring the bad eggs to finally admit that there’s something wrong with the chicken.

“I am 26 years old and my hometown is Cherry Hill, N.J. In 2012, I graduated magna cum laude from Rutgers University with a Bachelor’s degree in Psychology. I am now attending Rutgers University to earn a Master’s degree in psychology with an anticipated graduation date of May 2016. I have various interests in the field of psychology, including political psychology and social neuroscience. I am also a member of the Student Secular Alliance.”

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

P.O. Box 750 • Madison, WI 53701 • (608) 256-8900 • FFRF.org

What is the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

Founded in 1978 as a national organization of freethinkers (atheists and agnostics), the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc., works to [keep state and church separate](#) and to educate the public about the views of nontheists.

The Foundation’s email address is info@ffrf.org. Please include your name and physical mailing address with all email correspondence.

Foundation members wishing to receive online news releases, “action alerts” and “Freethought of the Day” should contact info@ffrf.org.

Fifth place: Graduate student college essay contest

Religions are responsible for their unclear teachings

FFRF awarded Peter \$500.

By Peter D. A. Wood

Since adolescence I have been taught that I am held accountable for what I tell others. As a child, if I told my younger siblings that a boogie man was in the basement, my parents held me responsible for dealing with their night terrors or overly aggressive relationship with the basement staircase. Reasonable parents would address a fear-mongering child like me by telling me to verify my claims before they might scare others. As adults we are similarly expected to think before we preach. Ironically, this type of accountability is rarely applied to the self-declared preachers of churches, mosques, synagogues and other houses of worship.

When faced with the problem of violent religious extremism, the institutions that extremists claim to be part of often claim those very groups to be non-representative outliers. In other words, they suggest that because hateful deviants fail to represent belief systems in a marketing-friendly manner, their association with the “peaceful” teachings of mainstream religions must be nullified and rejected. I find at least one viewpoint to be helpful in exploring such a problem: product liability law. This legal framework demonstrates how an undeniable contract, denoted in holy scripture and distributed by clergy as a divine bond between sinner and creator, exists between religious bodies and extremists committing horrific acts based on the doctrines and teachings of those religions. For success, eternal or otherwise, religions must be held responsible for the terrestrial results of any unclear or harmful orders found in those doctrines.

Product liability — the concept that producers of a product are held responsible for direct damages induced by that product — is directly related to



Peter D. A. Wood

how religions function. Organized religions produce worldviews, often dogmatically, which are essentially “purchased” by members of those faiths. People buy into religious dogma with the understanding that obedience to these instructions will yield terrestrial and heavenly rewards. Whether interpretations of these instructions result in something trivial (such as disinterest in grilled catfish) or something abhorrent (such as genocide), culpability needs to be assessed and asserted.

Within Christianity there are numerous examples of biblical references to self-sacrifice and later reward. Even in the New Testament — the less controversial testament showing a kinder, less megalomaniacal side of God — we see a producer-consumer type of relationship. Here God asks us to offer ourselves by praising him (Hebrews 13:15), and in turn we shall receive eternal salvation (1 Peter 1:5). 1 John 3:23 says that we are to believe in Jesus and love one another to gain entry into heaven. Love, however, takes many forms depending on the context. Love is commonly expressed in nonviolent or peaceful ways, but these options do not form an exhaustive list. Within the bible we are told by Jesus to “harm no

man” (Luke 3:14), but this same loving God also reminds us that nonbelievers will face “fire” and “perdition” on judgment day (2 Peter 3:7). When we consider doublespeak like this, it is easier to understand how “fighting the good fight” (1 Timothy 6:12) can mean both defending the meek and exploited (such as women and minorities), but also eliminating heretics (such as abortion-performing physicians) in order to purify God’s earth.

Many religious leaders say those guilty of atrocities done in the name of religion are radicals not connected to the institution. But did these radicals generate their ideas and association to, say, Islam or Buddhism, in a vacuum? Is it a coincidence radical Islamists revere the same Allah as nonviolent imams? No, because the religion responsible for the creation of this figure (and the promises he makes as a condition for obeying him) instigated much of the killer-making process. In this sense, religions are responsible for both the peaceful and violent products they inspire.

If radicals are not apt representations of a religion, but instead faulty products of the system of belief they try to uphold, isn’t their producer still liable?

When Barack Obama says extremists are misguided, or Pope Francis says they are religious deviants, we can make a logical connection: These misinterpretations and deviations come from doctrines which are susceptible to being misinterpreted. Events like the Second Vatican Council demonstrate how unclear doctrine is a concern that must be addressed. If similar lack of clarity inspires thousands to kill in the name of God, these doctrines certainly have not been made clear enough.

Religions are producers much like manufacturing companies. The products they distribute can be wondrous or they can be toxic hazards. Imagine if religions were taxed like manufacturers and sold their texts explicitly as instruction manuals for reaching heaven (much like “get rich quick!” or “lose 50

Extremists acting as self-appointed representatives of faith are not the only faces of religion, but they are religious ambassadors nonetheless.

pounds drinking lemon juice!” scams). Ambiguities within these texts would be held as liabilities and not as excused discretions in judgment. Extremists acting as self-appointed representatives of faith are not the only faces of religion, but they are religious ambassadors nonetheless. As atheists, secularists and agnostics, we must hold religions accountable for the messages they disseminate, rather than shamefully agreeing with their leaders that moderate belief is the only form of piety. Religious violence is a polarizing, multifaceted phenomenon. Solving it must start from within religious institutions by holding them accountable for their products, whether they are effective or dangerous. While asking for a recall of bibles, Qurans, and Bhagavad-Gitas like faulty microwave ovens is a bit ambitious, we should still strive to neutralize their negative influences. This can — and should — be done through firm diplomatic pressure toward countries tolerant of religions evading responsibility for their teachings. Through political accountability perhaps religious leaders will think twice before delivering unverifiable sermons based on misleading doctrines.

Peter is a 27-year-old graduate student from Davenport, Iowa. He’s a fifth-year doctoral candidate in geography at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Fla., and plans to graduate in May 2016. He graduated from Oklahoma State University in 2010 with degrees in geography and political science. He is a member of the Secular Student Alliance at FSU.

Sixth place: Graduate student college essay contest

Religious perversion: Ignoring the violence

FFRF awarded Tara \$400.

By Tara Clifford

The claim that there are only a few extremists in the world perverting religion is a very confusing one. Let us be clear on the definition “to pervert.” According to the Oxford Dictionary, it is to “alter (something) from its original course, meaning, or state to a distortion or corruption of what was first intended.” The only people perverting religion are those who look at their holy books and ignore all the violence and senseless murder, and who see only peace and love. These people try to use critical thinking and common sense in an area where it does not fit. To truly follow religion, one cannot pick and choose. The “cafeteria Catholic” is wrong; religion is not a buffet.

There is an extreme case of Holy Amnesia going around.

Religion requires fundamentalism, and this fundamentalism calls for violence. To rationalize religion is to go against one of the main tenets: that of blind, unquestionable faith.

There is an extreme case of Holy Amnesia going around. Coined by Professor Philip Jenkins, Holy Amnesia is when a follower ignores all of the horrendous, cruel and violent texts of their holy scriptures and only sees what they want. God has never condoned the killing of innocent people? All it takes is a quick Internet search on “religion and violence” to have access to hundreds of pages of quotes from all sorts of holy books calling for murder

and destruction. Leviticus 20:13 is a trending theme currently, as it states, “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death....” There is a whole other list of people who should be put to death, but this is a fan favorite. Many argue that this was meant for a specific time and place. People will go to great lengths to make excuses and rationalize the issue. Nonetheless, the only real interpretation is if you see a homosexual, kill him.

Christians of the Western world have a special kind of self-centered Holy Amnesia. They are able to forget and ignore all the violence in the bible, but are more than ready to point out the violence in the Quran. However, they are both winners as far as violence goes. The Quran 8.12 says, “so strike [them] upon the necks and strike from them every fingertip.” Just



Tara Clifford

as with Christian apologists, they will argue that you have to look in context of time, claim that it was meant for specific nonbelievers (definitely not for anyone today), or will even fight fire with fire saying, “Well, the bible says bad stuff, too!” As we all know, two wrongs do not make a right, and two

Continued on page 26

Honorable mention: Graduate student college essay contest

An explosive mix: Religion and violence

FFRF awarded Samuel \$200.

By Samuel David Capps

A blast inside a warehouse causes it to burn to the ground and kills five workers inside. An investigation reveals an arsonist started a fire in a janitorial closet. The emergency sprinklers should have been sufficient to extinguish the flames before they spread, but then it's discovered that workers during an earlier shift inappropriately stored several pallets of explosives next to the janitor's closet that allowed the fire to detonate and ultimately burn uncontrollably. Law enforcement and insurance companies are now left to sort out who's at fault. Most obviously, the arsonist should be prosecuted. He started the fire that caused the explosion and did so with destructive intentions. But had the explosives been properly stored by the earlier shift, the disaster and deaths likely would have been avoided. In interviews, the employees said they felt the situation was unsafe but followed their supervisor's orders anyway. The supervisor, the seemingly likely culprit, claimed company officials assured him the practice was safe, yet he admitted that he'd asked about safety only once in passing. The company's safety training program and facilities were found to be adequate, but it was revealed little was done to promote proper safety protocol in practice. While the arsonist is clearly to blame for setting the fire, the company and its employees were negligent for sure, and while they did nothing to directly cause the explosion, they also did nothing to actively prevent a potentially deadly situation. Widespread religious violence oc-

Billions of religious people around the world stand by and leave religion exposed to extremist interpretation.

curs in much the same way as the explosion. President Obama and others are not incorrect in blaming religious violence on a handful of extremists, but they are pointing out the obvious; they are blaming the arsonist. The people who are very often left unmentioned are the billions of religious people around the world who stand by and leave religion exposed to extremist interpretation. Religion, like the pallets of explosives, is often a seemingly neutral factor in the promotion of violence. Religion is not a person. It does not have free will and cannot act on its own. Religion is an idea, and ideas, like explosives, are tools made and used by people. Explosives go into bombs, but they are also used to build dams, safely demolish old, disintegrating structures and make beautiful fireworks displays. Religions are used in much the same ways: they can teach people to live together peacefully, find deeper meanings in life and nourish souls. At the same time, religions can divide groups of people, stifle individual freedoms and justify wars. Because people feel they are being called by a higher power, religion, like explosive material, has the potential to be extremely dangerous; but when used carefully and handled properly, religion can inspire a great deal of good. Recent examples include Pope Francis' focus on mercy and on

helping the poor and marginalized as well as Ayatollah Abdol-Hamid Masoumi-Tehrani's teachings of co-existence with the Bahá'í faith in Iran. If religious violence is to be contained and prevented, followers of all faiths must firmly reject and speak out against hateful, divisive, and violent teachings. People of all beliefs must be constantly active in preventing devastating explosions of religious violence. It's easy to see how these principles apply to Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other terrorist groups. Right now religious violence is focused in the Islamic world. The Middle East is a hotbed of extremism, hatred and bloodshed, and too few Muslims are taking a stand against it. However, violence has occurred in the name of every religion and often simmers just below the surface of all creeds. Even in the United States, by comparison an incredibly peaceful and civil country, religious intolerance exists. It is evident in the hateful, ethnocentric speech of small groups of extreme Christians, in the threatened Quran burning by Terry Jones and his followers, and in violence such as the Sikh temple shooting in 2012. While these acts may seem unrelated and perpetrated by lone wolves, they share a common religious and cultural background. Because the violence is not widespread and rampant, too few Americans speak out against it. It is obvious to those in the U.S. that such hateful acts are not what Christianity stands for today, but that fact is not so obvious to those in Muslim countries. Conversely, an alarming number of Christians believe Islam is inherently violent and must be countered with violence. It's that misunderstanding between faiths that escalates the intolerance and killing. People must speak out to quell extremism within their



Samuel David Capps

own religions and to communicate to other faiths that fundamentalist acts are "not in our name." The failure to stand up against extreme views is negligence; it's a failure to safely handle powerful systems of belief. Religion in itself is not to blame for violence in its name, but a small handful of fundamentalists are not solely the problem, either. Extremists start the fires, but the rest of us, religious and nonreligious, are to blame for standing by while explosive situations threaten to ignite the world.

Samuel, 29, was born and raised in Vernon, Texas. He is in the graduate architecture program at Cornell University and plans to graduate in 2018. As an undergraduate, he attended Texas Tech University where he earned degrees in architecture and sociology. He hopes to teach architecture at a university and also head a small firm designing public buildings.

Honorable mention: Graduate student college essay contest

Religion as a primary cause of war

FFRF awarded Sara \$200.

By Sara Rose

Religion has taken on two major roles in war and terrorism since the beginning of civilization. Religion acts as a motivation for violence. One group may see the actions of another as an affront to their god, decency and morality. They may wish to defend their god and their morals with swords or bombs. Religion can also act as justification for violence, and this role has become more common as globalization has increased. In these instances, we see a group of people who are after the resources of another. Instead of coming off as criminals, they claim religious rights over said resource, and rush into battle feeling self-righteous. Political scientists have found that not only is religion one of the most prominent reasons for violence, but the very nature of religion changes the human mind in such a way as to make violence against other people easier to commit and justify.



Sara Rose

Those who deny the role of religion in war are choosing to ignore solid data that proves otherwise. The numbers on the subject point very decidedly to organized religion as a major cause or excuse for death and destruction. Matthew White, librarian, historian and writer, has compiled vast statistics on the subject of death and war. In his book, *The Great Big Book of Horrible*

Things, he estimates that 10% of the most deadly wars in human history were caused directly by religious conflict, with the death toll of these wars being 53.5 million people. Of these, the majority were fought between groups of Christians. Tying for second place were Christians versus Muslims, versus Jews, and versus various Eastern religions. Another study, called, "God and War: Audit and Exploration," by the BBC, found that religion was a major factor in starting 21% of wars in recorded history. Even more disturbing, Oxford political scientist Monica Duffy Toft found that the instances of religion-based civil wars are actually increasing. According to her research, the percentage of civil wars that are based on religion has increased from 22% in the 1960s to 50% in the past decade. She notes that religiously-based civil wars "tend to last longer than secular civil wars (about two years longer), are more deadly to noncombatants, are less amenable to settlement by negotiation, and are more likely to recur than nonreligious wars." In just three examples we can see what an outlandish statement it is that religion is any-

Religion creates an 'us versus them' mentality, which can lead to increased willingness toward violence.

thing short of a major cause of war and violence. When looking over these statistics it is easy to see where someone might grab onto the idea that few of these percentages are above 30. However, it is imperative to understand that analyses are being made based on the stated reasons for wars. These numbers do not take into account the myriad times when religion has not been cited as the cause of a war, but was employed by political leaders as a justification for it. On top of that, we must keep in mind that religion can also be utilized to make it easier for soldiers to kill people. Religion creates an "us versus them" mentality, which can lead to increased willingness toward violence. There

Continued on page 26

Letterbox

Thanks to FFRF for gratitude, manners

Thank you for sending the photo with the acknowledgement plaque for the building fund. I am famous! It was very thoughtful and it shows that FFRF knows how to express gratitude to your donors. Which god taught you such gratitude and good manners?

Of course, the building is even more beautiful. I am so impressed with FFRF's efficiency and effectiveness.

Bruce Hilpert
Arizona

Speaking out against religion important

Many of us think that we have a responsibility to call out and speak out against mythical, supernatural and patently untrue religiosity. It's not at all difficult for most of us to observe that religious beliefs, including Christianity, are not harmless or benign.

Just look at the world today and consider how many of the current geopolitical conflicts have some basis in religion.

Particularly in the U.S., the Christian majority, Christian privilege and the countless public and private sources which promote and reinforce the Christian "message" have long enjoyed dominance in popular discussion and the public square.

Consequently, in a strident effort to encourage questioning, rational discussion and consideration of alternatives, some of us who identify as non-religious and secular may be and often are perceived by some as speaking out too often or too loudly against religion.

But I suggest that our enthusiasm and action is a matter of conviction, born of our desire to realize a more rational, scientific, cooperative and peaceful world. I also suggest that not nearly enough of us who reject religion, and recognize its deleterious effects on society and civilization, stand up and speak out on this critically important matter.

Gary McIntyre
Kentucky

Church-state separation in everyone's interest

Regarding the Nov. 22 (Washington Post) front-page article "In first majority-Muslim U.S. city, culture shock and fears of loss," apparently, some residents in Hamtramck, Mich., are fearful of the change that a Muslim-dominated city council could bring.

Perhaps the council meetings would open with prayers to Allah, or the council would use taxpayer money to erect Islamic monuments on government property and favor Muslim interests. Well, thank goodness for the separation of church and state guaranteed by the First Amendment. Oh, wait a minute! Christian-dominated city councils do these sorts of things all over the country to promote Christianity.

I hope someday people in this country will realize that it's in everyone's best interests to keep religion out of government as the founding fathers set out to do in writing the Constitution.

Michael R. Ware
Maryland

This letter was first published in the Washington Post.



'The Raven, Revisited' was great read

I just had to write to tell you how much I enjoyed "The Raven, Revisited" by Elizabeth Rose [November 2015]. Great! Spot on!

I was introduced to Edgar Allan Poe in high school, where we were required to read and recite the classics. This was in the 1950s. I never dreamed I'd hear it rendered in such a much-needed fashion.

I hope Elizabeth will consider lending her considerable talents to "revisit" some other classics with a view to expressing the same sentiments she so effectively presented in "Raven, Revisited."

Jim Parsons
Michigan

Source of faith often unexamined

Brian Bolton's extraordinary article in the November issue mentioned "Christian terrorism," a term that American fundamentalists find terribly offensive. Even the media are reluctant to link any aspect of terrorism to religion itself, especially Christianity. In fact, they go out of their way to make excuses for both the Christian and Islamic faiths.

There are good people in both Islam and Christianity, of course, but those people are good because they haven't examined the source of their faith: the Quran and the bible. Islamic terrorism is based on Quran passages such as: "Do not make friendship with Jews and Christians" (5:51), "fight and slay the Pagans, seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them" (9:5), "murder them and treat them harshly" (9:123), and "fight with them on until . . . religion becomes Allah's in its entirety." (8:39)

Christian terrorism (whether in the form of the KKK or Kim Davis) is based on biblical passages such as: "whosoever would not seek the Lord God of Israel should be put to death, whether small or great, whether man or woman" (2 Chronicles 15:12-13), "think not that I am come to bring peace on earth: I came not to bring peace but a sword. (Jesus in Matt. 10:34)

It doesn't take a genius to see there are many forms of terrorism, and that Christianity comes in for its share as well as the others.

Herb McClelland
Ohio

Go see the movie 'Spotlight'

I don't go to movies often; however, a friend recommended "Spotlight," and I am thrilled that she did.

I was gripped by the rapid-fire efforts of the Boston Globe's special investigative team, Spotlight. The members of this impressive team, with the blessing of the Globe's new editor, went where others were afraid to go as they heroically fought to bring the very powerful Archdiocese of Boston to account for the long-standing cover-up of priestly sex abuse of youngsters.

The tearful, angry and desperate details of so many of the adult survivors of the 87 (or more) perpetrators will sear themselves into your heart. Doubtlessly, my having been a Catholic priest back in the 1960s deepened my interest in the details. Nevertheless, this movie will surely touch deeply anyone who is personally interested, or has acquaintances interested, in the power of the Catholic Church.

Stephen F. Uhl
Arizona

*Stephen is the author of the book, **Out of God's Closet**, (available at ffrf.org/shop) and the FFRF "Friendly Atheist Stephen Uhl Studio" is named for him.*

• • •

"Spotlight" brilliantly conveys the evil caused by the Vatican system. Since I have been unable to reach the producers in order for a subsequent movie to be suggested, I write here for all FFRF readers and staff. The Vatican system itself cannot be made into a good system — ever.

What is generally missed is the fact that the Vatican mandates all the evils shown in the movie. It is not caused solely by neglect that can be cleared up. The evils are mandated in published documents.

Ann Slowey
Pennsylvania

Bible-free hotel rooms a great idea

FFRF's bible-free hotel room initiative is a spectacularly worthy effort.

Almost daily — no, make that daily (i.e., "Freethought of the Day") — FFRF exceeds expectations in representing the interests of those who favor reason over superstition, exuberance over piety and freethought over dogma.

Don Ardell

Florida

Biblical family values questionable

In her letter in the November issue, Sarah Bates asks sensible questions concerning the rotten behavior of some Christians.

It also makes sense to ask: What is taught to the defenseless young by X or Y congregations, and what is taught at home, so that they often grow up to feel such behavior is allowed?

All Christian churches teach different things, and the result is that the Christian message is divided and incoherent. It is no wonder there is moral dissonance. Since all faiths generally exclude all others, animosity by some is likely.

The history of Christianity is mainly ugly. Christians tend to see the face of their faith in the mirror of the present, but after 2,000-plus years, there are consequences.

It is useful to remember such passages as Matthew 10:34-36: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household." Not exactly an example of family values.

These ill-considered verses imply that the idea of Christian family values would be viewed dimly by their "savior."

Robert McCurdy
Pennsylvania

Mr. President: Don't forget faithless

Dear Mr. President:

In your recent [Dec. 6] speech to the nation, you said, ". . . it is the responsibility of all Americans — of every faith — to reject discrimination . . ."

In future speeches, I hope you will say "of every faith and of no faith."

Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Tammy Faye Bakker and pedophile priests are among the reasons I have given up faith.

George M. Caplan
Massachusetts

God is no Superman

My journey to atheism started as a boy. Like most boys I enjoyed watching Superman on television and wished I had super powers too. I knew Superman was just fantasy, but I thought the idea of him using his powers to help humankind was just about right.

Then I was off to church and Sunday school, where I was taught there was a god who really did have superhuman powers even greater than Superman's. What did he do with those powers? He killed humans: men, women and children! He also killed millions of animals and destroyed cities and towns. I quickly learned to hate this god.

The really sad part for me was that I knew my entire family, the people I loved and cared about most, all worshiped this mass murderer.

My eventual awakening relieved me of a lot of hate, but it also filled me with sadness to know people were being lied to and taken advantage of.

James Blackburn
Colorado

Despite backlash, FFRF right on grotto

As a board member of the Oregon FFRF chapter, I was fascinated by the way a letter from FFRF Staff Attorney Andrew Seidel to the Portland Public School Board was able to cause such widespread emotional upheaval in the “most unchurched city in America.” When the school board responded by not letting public high school choirs sing at the Roman Catholic outdoor shrine and sanctuary, you would think that FFRF had single-handedly banned motherhood, the flag and apple pie.

Even the TV outlets and daily newspaper in this liberal city seemed to line up against FFRF, which was portrayed as destroying a much-loved tradition of having the choirs sing at their elaborate Christmas display, which, by the way, reaps a tidy profit for the Catholic Church, as they charge admission to get in.

Everyone seems to have lost sight of the fact that public schools, by taking part in the Christmas festival at The Grotto, are raising funds for the church so well-known for its pedophile priest issues. What rational person wants our kids raising money for pedophiles?

We aren’t finished. There are still dozens of public schools outside PPS still sending choirs to sing at The Grotto. Hopefully, in 12 months we will be able to report that all public schools have stopped participating there.

Wes Mahan
Oregon

Tip to carrier: We’re not all Christian

I recently got a religious card from my newspaper carrier tucked inside my newspaper. I’ll share my email to the Green Valley News & Sun:

“I don’t mind the idea of receiving a holiday card that acts as a reminder to tip my carrier for her service in the last year. I’ve received that sort of thing before and it’s fine.

“What I do NOT appreciate is this blatantly religious card. On the front, there’s an angel, apparently trumpeting the good news over what must be Bethlehem, which has a star with a tail hanging over it. Inside, the card’s message reads: ‘May we all rejoice in celebration for having been given the greatest gift of all . . . Jesus Christ. Merry Christmas.’ As an atheist, I resent this. As I would were I anything but Christian — Muslim, Hindu, Wiccan, etc. [Carrier’s name] will not be receiving a tip from me any time soon, regardless of the quality and reliability of her service. And I would appreciate it if you would ask her and all your carriers, if they include a greeting card with the paper at this time of year, to make the cards secular ones. Thank you.”

The editor responded: “Carriers are not employees; they are contract workers so our oversight is limited to what’s in the contract. Re: Cards inserted into the paper, the only contractual limitation we put on them is that they not directly ask for money/tips through the cards. An employee in circulation looked at the cards from [the carrier] and approved them because they didn’t violate the agreement. You are right, the cards do provide an opportunity for customers who receive quality, reliable service to tip the carriers. As for the sentiment enclosed, that is up to the carrier.”

Neysa Dickey
Arizona



The Maine event

FFRF Maine, which became official in October 2014, currently has 37 members. The group brought Katherine Stewart, investigative journalist and author of *The Good News Club: The Christian Right’s Stealth Assault on America’s Children*, to speak in Augusta. In 2016, FFRF Maine plans to open the Maine Legislature with a secular presentation, march in the Gay Pride parade and go back to the Common Ground Faire. For more information, email Tom Waddell, president of FFRF Maine, at ffrfmaine@gmail.com.

Back row: Jason, Tim, Dick, Kate, Maureen, Sarah, Sharon, Rick, Tom and Bob. Front row: Gene, David, Raisa, Marilyn, Susan, David and Karen.

Let’s save the children from religion

I have been a proud atheist for many years, ever since I understood what the bible writers were saying. My atheism was a result of a trip to Mexico, where I witnessed firsthand the sick and dying children whom God had forgotten. It was that moment I realized there were no gods, only humans who should be treating each other much better. Realizing that all of us are born atheists and only blindly follow religious creeds because our parents followed blindly, I know we must stop that vicious cycle. As Sam Harris said, “The teaching of faith is not a virtue but a crime especially perpetrated on children.”

Julie Fausette
New York

‘E Pluribus Unum’ beats ‘In God We Trust’

In response to David Lubeck’s letter in the November issue, I also have for some time been correcting the Treasury Department’s mistake by replacing its religious endorsement with “E Pluribus Unum.” I would encourage all freethinkers to engage in this act of peaceful protest.

Todd Peterson
Florida

Put Atheists in Foxholes monument in D.C.

Thank you for the Atheist in Foxholes monument. A copy of the monument should be installed alongside the other war monument on the National Mall in Washington D.C.

Well done!
Peter J. Viviano
New Mexico

You can’t just *decide* to have faith

Although raised in a religious household, I would characterize my religious beliefs after age 18 as “nothing in particular.” Without my parents to make me go to church, I stopped going and just didn’t think about it. As I entered middle age, the urge to seek answers and reexamine my life awakened. Having been given a full Southern Baptist indoctrination in my youth and an excellent university education, I was able to compare the two bodies of knowledge and come to the conclusion that the emperor truly had no clothes. Christianity and indeed most organized religions seemed to be a sham that offered no answers to the questions I raised.

Faith is the key issue. Richard Daw-

kins said in *The God Delusion*, “Believing is not something I can decide to do as an act of will.” He goes on to say the idea that believing is something you can decide to do is ludicrous. A Christian book I reviewed agrees, saying, “Faith can’t be created. You have to open your heart and let it enter.”

I had an open heart for some 50 years and all that entered it were doubts and questions.

Let’s assume for a moment that there is a Christian God. It seems he decides to place faith in some people and a questioning nature in others. So God denies me the “gift” of faith, but allows me to use my God-given intelligence to discover that there is absolutely no evidence that any supernatural entity has ever existed. Then he condemns me to hell for what, in essence, he has done. By using what he gave me, I have sinned. How is this just?

I have also disposed of the crippling concept of sin. It is a false construct to keep the masses under control. My morality comes from my own ability to determine what is right and what is wrong. I find very little of what anyone would deem “moral” anywhere in the Old Testament, and the virtues of the New Testament are questionable at best. I avoid doing what I believe is wrong because it is wrong and I would feel disappointed in myself if I did it. A Christian friend tells me this is sinful. He says I should do right “for fear of the Lord.”

I am relieved I am no longer caught up in his nightmare.

Curtis Bass
North Carolina

Much appreciation for FFRF’s work

I really appreciate what you do. I enjoy going through Freethought Today, and it’s always enlightening (and a bit disheartening) to read “Crank Mail.” It must get a little old and unnerving having people call you names or threatening the lives of yourselves and your families. Thinking about this, it gives an even deeper appreciation for what all of you are doing on behalf of those of us in “the most hated minority in America.”

I’ve enclosed a few goodies from Michigan for you to enjoy: some “homegrown” chocolates and coffee. I have no idea if these products were produced by freethought hands, but I can attest to their deliciousness.

Keep up the great work!

Christopher Wright
Michigan

Editor’s note: FFRF staff devoured your phenomenal Drost’s chocolates and special blend coffee. Thank you, Christopher!

‘Evidence against interest’ is especially convincing

I am writing this letter Dec. 15, the fourth anniversary of Christopher Hitchens’ death. He was fond of pointing out that “evidence against interest” is especially convincing evidence.

As an example, global warming skeptic Richard A. Muller was hired by the Koch brothers to conduct independent research into the theory of anthropogenic global warming. When he and a dozen of the scientists he worked with concluded in 2012 that global warming science was true, it was a more convincing scientific conclusion by virtue of this same evidence against interest principle.

The same sorts of gifts come to us all the time from the religious. This brings me to the gift I recently received on my Twitter feed from internationally noted Islamic apologist Mehdi Hassan. On Dec. 12 he retweeted an all-too-revealing and typically disparaging ad hominem attack on Ayaan Hirsi Ali about her receiving the prestigious Lantos Award for her courageous advocacy of human rights. His sarcastic tweet: “Yeah this’ll help persuade Muslims to turn away from ISIS. This woman who says Islam should be militarily defeated.”

This unwitting admission is evidence against interest in Hassan’s own words, which makes it crystal clear that Islam is not now and never has been a “religion of peace.” Evidence against interest, watch for it. Thank you, Hitch.

Bruce Baldwin
Pennsylvania

Is humanity’s nature revealed in heaven?

In the November 2015 issue of “The Smithsonian” was the article, “Slavery’s Trail of Tears.” How could people treat other people this way and not feel some sort of remorse? Historical apologists would say we cannot judge yesterday’s actions with today’s sensibilities. True to a point, but given the idea that morality does not come from religion, one would expect even a small spark of inbred concern when others are in misery. Some semblance of empathy should exist, if not then at least now, but we all know that slavery is alive and well even today and the subjugation of people is often backed up by some evangelical religion or even our own subliminal thinking.

I would suggest that cognitive dissonance, coupled with some prevailing religious dogma, fosters branding others as subhuman savages, which condemns any feelings of empathy. These beliefs are so deep that the descendants of the perpetrators (and even some slaves) are loath to discuss this painful period in our history. Of course this sort of barbarity is common even today. So much for society’s values being set by religion.

If religion determines one’s moral actions, one must assume one is naturally immoral and bad. If heaven is the ultimate reward for good behaving people, what happens after one obtains their ultimate reward? Does the basic nature of people (which religion says is bad) come into play? Once the eternal reward is at hand, can people revert to their true nature so that heaven is filled with all kinds of barbaric behavior? Does heaven become a hell? Is the objective of a heaven a place where one can practice their true nature?

Jack Pedigo
Washington

Black Collar Crime Blotter

Compiled by Bill Dunn

Arrested / Charged

Kamron E. Reames, Darlington, SC: 2 counts of 3rd-degree criminal sexual conduct involving a minor. Reames, associate pastor for students at Central Baptist Church, is accused of sexually touching a boy.

Police Chief Daniel Watson said “compelling evidence supporting the complaint was substantiated.”

Reames, in his mid-30s, has been with the church since 2002. His online bio says his “love for Jesus and teens is evident through his words and actions.” *Source: WBTW, 12-19-15*

Stephen J. Schacter, 55, Toronto: Possession of child pornography. Schacter was allegedly seen viewing child porn on a public computer at a social services center. He worked as an elementary teacher for the Eitz Chaim group of Orthodox day schools from 1986 to 2004, as an office administrator at United Synagogue Day School from 2005-09 and a private tutor from 2008-11. United Synagogue, now called Robbins Hebrew Academy, is affiliated with the Conservative movement. *Source: Haaretz, 12-19-15*

Steven V. Williams, 52, Bowen, KY: Sexual abuse of a minor under the age of 12 and sexual abuse of a minor under the age of 18. Williams, who resigned as youth pastor at First Church of God after being arrested, is charged with sexually touching 2 girls during a church field trip and at the church. He also drove a bus for Powell County Schools, where he's been suspended. *Source: WKYT, 12-19-15*

Tommy Joe Newberry, 48, Milry, AL: 2nd-degree sodomy and sexual abuse, 1st-degree sexual abuse and enticing a child to enter for immoral purposes. Newberry, pastor of Red Creek Church of God in Buckatunna, MS, and director of a youth camp, is charged with molesting at least 6 underage boys since 2003. An alleged victim told police Newberry performed oral sex on him numerous times at the pastor's residence. *Source: al.com, 12-18-15*

Cristopher B. Alfaro, 30, Huntsville, AL: 2 counts of transmitting obscene material to a child. Police Lt. Stacy Bates said Alfaro used his position as youth minister at Covenant Presbyterian Church to commit the alleged crimes. *Source: WHNT, 12-16-15*

Kenneth L. Dewitt, 67, Newport, AR: 50 counts of 3rd-degree sexual assault. Dewitt is accused of having sex with 3 female inmates at an Arkansas Department of Correction facility while he was a Protestant chaplain there in 2013-14, after which he left the prison after reportedly admitting inappropriate contact with another chaplain.

Dewitt has ties with Bill Gothard, an evangelical minister with a history of sexual misconduct allegations. *Source: Arkansas Times/KARK, 12-17-15*

Nehoray Shabbot, 20, Worcester, MA: Assault as a hate crime, aggravated harassment as a hate crime, assault and aggravated harassment. Shabbot, a Hasidic Jew, is charged with attacking “Elegant” Elliott Offen, 63, a cross-dresser who's been featured on “The Howard Stern Show,” in December outside and inside Chabad Lubavitch headquarters in Brooklyn, NY.

Police sources alleged Shabbot punched and kicked Offen and yelled “You homo, I'm going to cut off your schmekel!” (a Yiddish profanity for penis). *Source: NY Post, 12-14-15*

Bryan K. Johnson, 49, Jefferson Parish, LA: Carnal knowledge of a juvenile. Johnson, pastor of Vineyard Ministries in Westwego and Greater Cypress Grove Missionary Baptist Church in Algiers, is accused of starting a sexual relationship with a 16-year-old girl.

The girl's mother told investigators she suspected something was wrong when her daughter started cutting class, skipping sports practice and talking about Johnson a lot. *Source: WWL, 12-11-15*

Brandon McDade, 30, Mission Viejo, CA: Lewd and lascivious acts with a child and child annoyance. McDade, youth pastor at Grace Hills Church, is accused of alleged incidents over a 2-year period with several teens who were in his youth group. *Source: KABC, 12-10-15*

Armando Sosa Perez, 55, Vancouver, WA: Money laundering and 3 counts of 1st-degree theft. Perez, pastor at St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church, is accused of stealing more than \$50,000 from the parish between 2011-14.

He was transferred in July 2014 to a parish in Renton, the affidavit said. After Perez was transferred, the Archdiocese of Seattle hired a forensic accountant. Tom Belleque, St. John's current pastor, alleged in an affidavit that Perez was “double dipping” by skimming money for performing weddings, funerals, baptism and



PERP WATCH — Rotten Tomatoes’ movie critics gave “Spotlight” thumbs-up to the tune of 97%. FFRF staff attended a late-afternoon screening of the horrific but riveting story of how the Boston Globe broke the story in 2002 of the Catholic clergy abuse scandal and cover-up by the Archdiocese of Boston.

other ceremonies and misusing parish debit and credit cards. Belleque said casino fliers addressed to Perez were coming regularly in the mail. *Source: The Columbian, 12-8-15*

Henry L. McGee, 68, Round Rock, TX: Continuous sexual abuse of a child. McGee, lead pastor at First Baptist Church in Austin, is accused of committing sexual acts with a girl, starting in June 2014 when she was 13.

The girl allegedly told detectives she had sex with McGee more than 15 times, including in a storage unit, his church office and his home when his wife was gone.

First Baptist has a new interim pastor. Black tape covers the spot on the church sign where McGee's name had been. *Source: American-Statesman/KXAN, 12-8-15*

Ruben Bahena, 34, Mathis, TX: Failure to appear. Bahena, former senior pastor at First Assembly of God, was arrested by U.S. marshals in November after a warrant was issued for failure to appear for a court hearing on a charge of sexual assault of a child for an alleged 2014 incident. *Source: KZTV, 12-8-15*

Curtis W. Blankenship, Powhatan, VA: Voting more than once in the same election, a felony. Blankenship, pastor of Cumberland Baptist Temple, allegedly voted absentee and then went to a different polling station and tried to get another ballot Nov. 3, 2015. *Source: Powhatan Today, 12-7-15*

Amador Medina, 32, Hartford, CT: 5 counts of disinterment of bodies, conspiracy to commit a crime and accessory before the fact. Medina, a practicing Santería priest, allegedly admitted to police he had bodies stored in his home. Police found remains of 3 adults and 2 children, believed to have been taken Oct. 9 from a mausoleum in a cemetery in Worcester, MA.

The Caribbean religion uses remains for medicinal purposes, but remains are usually from animals. *Source: myfoxboston.com, 12-7-15*

Catholic priest “L.S.,” 57, Legnaro, Italy, is being investigated for embezzlement of \$108,000 from the Catholic charity Caritas. He's alleged to have used the money to buy a car, a scooter, holidays in the Dolomites and Sicily, sporting equipment and cosmetic treatments for his mother. *Source: the local.it, 12-4-15*

Lawrence Johnson, 52, Shivaji Nagar, India: Sexual assault of a child. Johnson, priest in charge at Christ the King Catholic Church, is accused of sodomizing a 13-year-old boy who had stayed after Mass in November. The complaint alleges Johnson saw him sitting in a pew and asked him to help move some items to a storeroom, where the alleged rape occurred.

Johnson disappeared after the complaint was filed. Acting on a tip, police arrested him at a friend's home.

Police Inspector Balasaheb Jadhav said a medical exam revealed wounds on the boy's private parts. *Source: Times of India, 12-2-15*

Keith Wood, 39, Big Rapids, MI: Jury tampering and obstruction of justice. Wood, a former pastor and current self-employed insurance broker, was arrested for handing out pamphlets about jury nullification outside a county courthouse, even though no jury was impaneled. “I'm a disciple of Jesus Christ,” said Wood, a father of 7. “Jesus said ‘the truth will set you free’ and I want people to know the truth.”

The flier's title is “What rights do you have as a juror that the judge won't tell you about?”

Wood pleaded not guilty and invoked the First Amendment at arraignment. He's apparently interested in a case in which an Amish man is charged with wetlands violations. *Source: mlive.com, 12-1-15*

Tiffanie Irwin, New Hartford, NY: 2nd-degree murder. Irwin, pastor of Word of Life Church, is among 8 people charged in the October death at the church of Lucas Leonard, 19. Others charged are **Traci Irwin**, the pastor's mother; her brothers **Joseph and Daniel Irwin**; the victims' father, **Bruce Leonard**; and **3 other church members**.

Authorities said “spiritual counseling” spiraled into an all-night punishment session for Lucas and his brother Christopher Leonard because Lucas had indicated he wanted to leave the secretive church, which also served as a residence and school. *Source: Troy Record, 11-25-15*

Robert B. Azinger, 54, Florida, OH: 1st-degree statutory rape, 4 counts of 1st-degree statutory sodomy and 5 counts of 2nd-degree statutory sodomy. Azinger, pastor of St. Peter Lutheran Church, was arrested on a Scott City, MO, warrant that accuses him of alleged incidents with a female in 2006-09 when he was pastor of Eisleben Lutheran church. He moved with his family to Ohio in 2009. *Source: KFVS, 11-24-15*

Alfredo H. Zavala, 56, Oaxaca, Mexico: Multiple counts of rape. Zavala, pastor of Luz del Mundo Christian Church, is charged with raping 2 sisters more than 100 times in a church office, starting when they were 9 and 10. They're now 13 and 14.

He allegedly told the girls it was their duty as Christians to have sex with him. *Source: Huffington Post, 11-21-15*

Aaron Gaddis, 55, DeSoto, TX: Sexual assault of a child. Gaddis, associate pastor of Mt. Hebron Missionary Baptist Church in Garland, is accused of molesting a 15-year-old boy in 2002. Police said in a release that Gaddis may have assaulted other children. *Source: WFAA, 11-20-15*

Black tape covers the spot on the church sign where Pastor McGee's name had been.

Pleaded / Convicted

Ronald C. Williams, 36, Honolulu: Guilty by jury of lewd or lascivious acts and attempted sodomy of a child under the age of 14. The crimes occurred in 2005 when the victim, a family friend, was 11 and Williams was director of San Marcos Christian Camp in Santa Barbara County, CA. *Source: News-Press, 12-19-15*

Steve Karro, 56, Miami Beach, FL: Pleaded guilty to misdemeanor battery in a plea bargain after originally being charged with lewd and lascivious behavior with a minor. Karro, a substitute rabbi at Shaare Ezra Sephardic Synagogue Congregation, was charged with fondling

an 11-year-old girl at his art gallery in May

The girl's mother addressed the court for 15 minutes, urging the judge not to accept the deal: “On April 16, 2015, Rabbi Karro took my daughter, touched and squeezed her buttocks, placed her on his lap, took off her glasses, touched her hair, told her how pretty she was, rubbed her thighs and kissed her up and down her neck.”

Karro claimed nothing sexual happened and said he was only trying to cleanse the girl of negative energy. *Source: CBS Miami, 12-12-15*

Robert Couture, 51, Tecumseh, Ontario: Guilty by jury of theft over \$5,000. Couture allegedly stole between \$170,000 and \$234,000 from St. Anne Catholic Parish from 2002-10 by stealing from collection plates and donations for funerals, weddings, baptisms and Mass offerings.

The Diocese of London doesn't plan to reassign Couture, said spokeswoman Emma Moynihan. “He will still have the title of priest, but he won't have any of his faculties,” adding that the diocese only tries to defrock priests in sexual abuse cases. *Source: National Post, 12-11-15*

René Heuillet, 80, Saint-Lizier, France: Pleaded guilty to stealing \$740,000 from church coffers between 1987-2013 as a Catholic parish priest. The thefts were brought to light by the priest who succeeded him.

Prosecutor Karline Bouisset said authorities froze holdings of \$712,000 in Heuillet's bank account. *Source: Reuters, 12-1-15*

Sentenced

Marcello Trebitsch, 38, Brooklyn, NY: 2 years in prison and forfeiture of \$5.9 million that Trebitsch, an Orthodox rabbi and Talmud scholar, defrauded investors out of in a Ponzi scheme. He pleaded guilty to securities fraud 3 weeks after his father-in-law, state Assembly Speaker **Sheldon Silver**, 71, was found guilty of collecting \$4 million in bribes and kickbacks. *Source: The Forward, 12-17-15*

Martin Wolmark, 57, Monsey, NY: 38 months in prison, 2 years' probation and \$50,000 fine after pleading guilty to a charge of conspiracy to commit extortion. Wolmark, an Orthodox rabbi, was recorded by an undercover federal agent posing as a woman seeking a religious divorce called a “get.” Jewish law makes women 2nd-class citizens by mandating that the husband grant the “get” for the divorce to go forward.

Mendel Epstein, 70, Lakewood, NJ, an associate of Wolmark's, received a 10-year sentence for conspiracy to commit kidnapping. **Bin-yamin Stimler, 40, Brooklyn,** was sentenced to 39 months for his role in the scheme. At least 7 others have been charged in the case.

Wolmark told the woman it would cost \$30,000 to get the job done. “You need to get him to New York to harass him or nail him — plain and simple,” he's heard saying. He told her some “tough guys” would use cattle prods and karate on her handcuffed husband. *Source: nj.com, 12-15-15*

Henry Moloney, 77, Dublin, Ireland: 4 years in prison with 1 year suspended after being found guilty of 2 counts of indecent assault in 1981-82 of a male student at a Catholic school in Tipperary. Moloney was defrocked as a Catholic Spiritan priest earlier in 2015 at his own request.

He was convicted of similar offenses in 2000 and 2009 and served 15 months.

Moloney was choirmaster and played the organ in the school's chapel. The first incident was in the organ gallery, the victim told the court, when Moloney put his hand under the boy's shirt and down his trousers to his buttocks. *Source: RTE/Irish Times, 12-15-15*

Ronald Joling, 71, and Dorothea Joling, 73, Coquille, OR: 8 years and 4 years, respectively, in prison for tax evasion. Ronald Joling, pastor of Hope Covenant Reformed Church, and his wife fled to Arizona during their trial last year for evading taxes of \$1.2 million.

They asserted the government had no authority to collect taxes, citing biblical authority used by the “sovereign citizen” movement. *Source: Register-Guard, 12-11-15*

Ubaldo Ocasio, 52, Cleveland, OH: 205 years in prison on convictions for rape, gross sexual imposition, kidnapping, sexual battery and endangering children. The Pentecostal pastor of Iglesia Misionera Casa de Misericordia won't be eligible for parole for 128 years, in 2143.

Ocasio, charged with molesting 4 girls as young as 9, turned down a plea deal that would have recommended a sentence of 30 years. *Source: cleveland.com, 12-10-15*

Abu Bilal Ismail, 47, a Lebanese imam living in Denmark, was fined \$1,400 by a German court for incitement to hatred for a July 2014 sermon at a mosque in Berlin in which he said “Count them and kill them to the very last one. Don't spare a single one of them,” calling for the

destruction of Zionist Jews. *Source: Jerusalem Post, 12-9-15*

Ioan Pop, 57, Scarborough, Ontario: 7 months in prison and 3 years' probation for sexual assaults on 8 young adult women between 1999-2013 while he served as a Romanian Orthodox priest.

One woman testified she was molested after seeking help from Pop while her husband was in a coma after a car accident. *Source: Toronto Sun, 12-8-15*

Craig R. Lorick, 54, Adelanto, CA: 40 days in jail with credit for 2 days served and 3 years' probation. Lorick, senior pastor of Down 2 Earth Christian Fellowship, an Assemblies of God church, pleaded no contest to having unlawful sexual intercourse with a minor more than 3 years younger than him. A count of lewd or lascivious acts with a child was dismissed.

Dennis Morris, co-founder of Moses House Ministries in Victorville, commented, "[M]y question is, who is the judge that would let him go so easily? That's a slap on the wrist." *Source: Daily Press, 12-7-15*

Johnny W. Cabe, 56, York, SC: 5 years' probation after pleading no contest to the unlawful practice of medicine. He was indicted in 2010 for contributing to the delinquency of a minor and committing a lewd act on a child under 16 at Riverside Independent Baptist Church, where he was pastor.

Cabe was charged twice in the 1990s but not convicted on allegations he gave hernia exams and had other improper contact with minor boys at the church. He spent 7 years in prison for a 2001 conviction for stealing \$8 million from religious followers in a pyramid scheme.

Prosecutors said they offered a plea deal to avoid forcing the boy to testify. *Source: Rock Hill Herald, 12-4-15*

Rudolph Walls, 64, Dillon, SC: 15 years in prison after pleading guilty to criminal sexual conduct with a minor and failure to register as a sex offender. Walls, pastor at Friendly Chapel Church, admitted molesting 2 boys under age 16 who attended his church. Walls is a registered sex offender in N. Carolina and has several convictions on similar charges. *Source: WBTW, 12-2-15*

Edward Belczak, 70, Troy, MI: 27 months in prison for stealing \$573,000 from St. Thomas More Catholic Church, where he was pastor for 29 years. Sentencing him, U.S. District Judge Arthur Tarnow told Belczak to "choose your friends wisely and you can do some good in prison."

Belczak's reply to Tarnow after hearing his fate was "It's part of my destiny." *Source: Detroit Free Press, 12-1-15*

Caleb Sexton, 28, Lancaster, NY: 6 months in jail after pleading guilty to criminal sexual conduct. Sexton, who coached soccer and basketball at West Seneca Christian School, admitted that when he was 26, he engaged in sexual conduct with a 13-year-old girl he met at Hedstrom Baptist Church in Cheektowaga, where his father was pastor. *Source: WGRZ, 11-24-15*

Peter Keeley-Pannett, 71, Brighton, UK: 32 months in prison for making indecent images of children and causing or inciting a minor to engage in sexual activity. When arrested in 2014, Keeley-Pannett was an unpaid deacon in the Anglican Diocese of Chichester.

He used a webcam to meet boys as young as 13 in online chatrooms and Skyped with them, prosecutors said. *Source: premier.org/uk, 11-20-15*

Civil Lawsuits Filed

Catholic priests **Bernard Bissonnette, Sabine Griego** and **Edward Rutowski** and the **Archdiocese of Santa Fe, NM**, are being sued by 4 plaintiffs who allege they were molested as boys as far back as 1968. "John Doe 56" alleges he was a 7-year-old altar boy when Bissonnette started raping him.

Two plaintiffs allege Griego molested them multiple times as altar boys at Our Lady of Sorrows Parish. *Source: The New Mexican, 12-17-15*

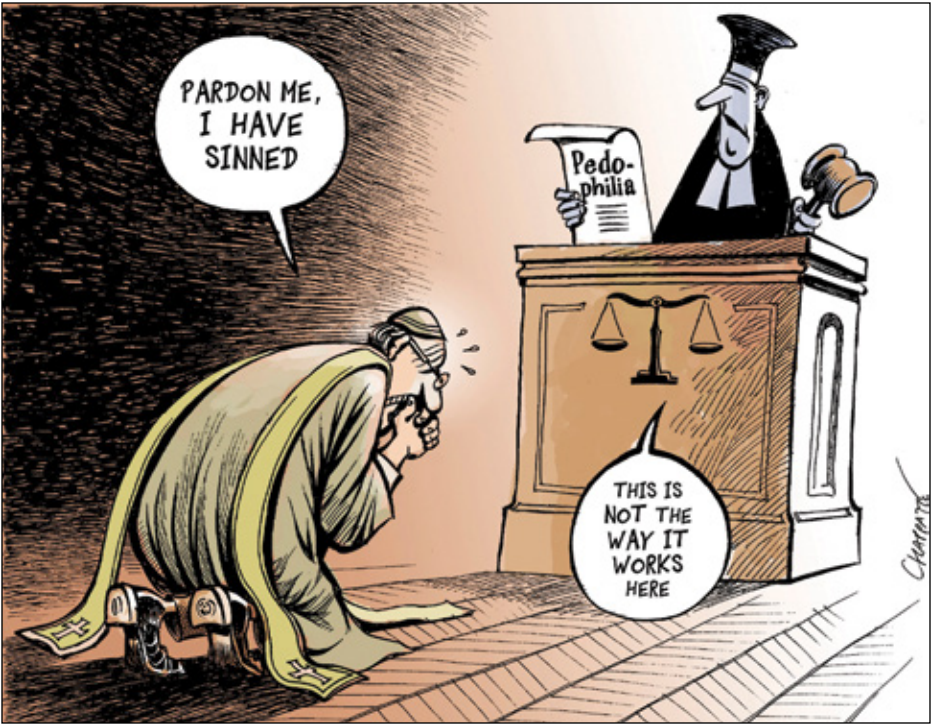
Peter Miqueli, 53, Bronx, NY, pastor of St. Frances de Chantal Catholic Church, is being sued by 14 parishioners for allegedly stealing over \$1 million. Miqueli, who has resigned, allegedly paid his lover \$1,000 per rough sex session. The lover, **Keith Crist**, is a co-defendant who made "sex slave" Miqueli call him "master" and drink his urine, the suit alleges.

New York Cardinal **Timothy Dolan** and the archdiocese are also named defendants. *Source: NY Daily News, 12-13-15*

Fellowship Bible Church of Brentwood, TN, is being sued for \$37.5 million in a lawsuit by the parents of a 3-year-old boy who allege he was raped in August 2014 at the church by a male teen volunteer. The teen is not identified in news stories.

The suit alleges the church's volunteer training video devotes only 45 seconds to preventing child molestation and asserts the church "tried to blame the [family] for what happened, insisting the horrors their son described must have been something he heard at home." *Source: The Tennessean, 12-1-15*

The Catholic **Diocese of Rockville Cen-**



tre, NY, and the **Vincentian Congregation** are being sued by a couple who allege pedophile priest **Augusto Cortez**, 52, molested their daughter, 8, last year. Cortez, who vanished after being interviewed by police, pleaded guilty in 2009 to forcible touching of a 12-year-old girl in 2008. He was sentenced to 6 years' probation but was allowed to remain a priest.

A member of the girl's family told authorities last June that she saw Cortez hitching up his pants after being alone in the room with the child at a family party at her home. *Source: AP, 11-17-15*

Civil Lawsuits Settled

Yehuda Berg, 43, Los Angeles, known as "rabbi to the stars," was found liable by a jury for inflicting emotional distress on former follower Jena Scaccetti, who was awarded \$177,500 in damages for sexual misconduct.

Scaccetti alleged Berg, former co-director of the Kabbalah Center, of giving her alcohol and Vicodin before groping and trying to overpower her after she complained about painful kidney stones. Berg testified that he only touched her leg to see if "anything intimate" might happen.

The center was ordered to pay \$42,500 of the total award. *Source: Reuters, 11-25-15*

Legal Developments

The Pennsylvania Superior Court ordered a new trial and overturned the conviction of **Msgr. William Lynn, 64, Philadelphia,** ruling 2-1 that the trial judge let jurors hear too much evidence about Catholic priests molesting children. He was sentenced in 2012 to 3-6 years in prison for failure to supervise a priest who assaulted a 10-year-old boy, making him the highest-ranking Catholic official to face charges for covering up abuse.

"This ruling rubs salt into already deep and still fresh wounds of Philadelphia Catholics and victims," said David Clohessy, Survivor's Network of those Abused by Priests director.

Lynn's conviction was also overturned in 2013 by a state appeals court after he'd served 18 months, a decision the state Supreme Court reversed. *Source: Reuters, 12-22-15*

The Ohio Supreme Court heard arguments in a case involving **Brian Williams**, former Grace Brethren Church senior pastor convicted of sexual battery of congregant Jessica Simpkins when she was 15 in 2008. The victim is challenging a law that caps compensation at \$250,000 for childhood victims of sexual abuse. A jury awarded her \$3.5 million.

Simpkins testified Williams forced her to perform oral and vaginal sex during a counseling session. Robin Weixel, an earlier alleged victim, testified that in 2002 when she was 18, she met with Williams about going on a mission trip. She testified he shared details of his marital sex life, told her "most men view women as a thing to be fucked" and shared his views on women dressing provocatively.

The Ohio Chamber of Commerce supports damages caps, said President Andy Doehrel, because businesses need certainty. "If you don't have that type of certainty, one — you can't cover it with insurance and, two — you won't be able to stay in business." *Source: WCMH, 12-9-15*

The Catholic **Diocese of Duluth, MN**, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy to become the 15th U.S. diocese or religious order to seek protection from sex abuse claims.

A jury awarded \$8.1 million in November to William Weis for his 1978 molestation by **James Fitzgerald**, a priest who died in 2009. The diocese was held liable for \$4.8 million, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate order for the rest.

Vicar General James Bissonnette said that given the "magnitude of the verdict, the diocese was left with no choice but to file for reorganization." The diocese's operating budget for the last

fiscal year was \$3.3 million.

The diocese faces 5 more lawsuits and 12 notices of claims. *Source: News Tribune, 12-7-15*

Allegations of sexual abuse by a **Diocese of Winona, MN**, Catholic priest in 1962 were made public by the diocese and **St. Mary's Parish** in Winona. Both are defendants in a suit alleging abuse by **Richard Hatch**, who died in 2005.

At least 3 alleged victims of Hatch have come forward. *Source: AP, 12-7-15*

Travis R. Smith, 45, California, MO, had a mistrial declared on the first day of his trial on several counts of statutory and forcible rape and sodomy dating as far back as 1998. When Smith was arrested in 2012, he was pastor of First Baptist Church of Stover. The judge declared a mistrial due to a comment made about a witness by a potential juror during jury selection.

A jury acquitted Smith in 2011 of 2nd-degree child molestation. A 2010 statutory rape charge was dropped by prosecutors after they determined the alleged victim was 17 and not 15 and thus was able to give legal consent. *Source: KOMU/Lake Sun, 12-7-15*

The U.S. Supreme Court left in place the 2011 sexual misconduct conviction of **Minnesota Catholic priest Christopher Wenthe**, 51. He was charged with starting a 15-month sexual relationship with a 21-year-old woman who went to him in 2003 for counseling for an eating disorder. An appeals court threw out the conviction, which the state Supreme Court reinstated. *Source: AP, 12-7-15*

Brian M. Lederer, 30, a Hibbing, MN, Catholic priest, will stand trial on 7 sexual assault and child pornography charges, ruled Judge David Ackerson. Lederer had challenged the sufficiency of evidence, based largely on claims by 4 girls aged 10-14 who reported inappropriate touching by Lederer at Blessed Sacrament Parish and Assumption Catholic School.

Ackerson ruled some evidence couldn't be used to prove sexual intent, including allegations Lederer "snapped" the girls' bras. *Source: News Tribune, 12-1-15*

Rabbi Berg testified that he only touched her leg to see if 'anything intimate' might happen.

Allegations

Australian Catholic priest John Day was found in a drunken state in a vehicle while consorting with prostitutes in 1956 but wasn't arrested, according to testimony before the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Denis Ryan testified he was among 3 police officers who pulled over a car that kept bouncing off the curb. Day "was pissed to the eyeballs with his strides [trousers] around his ankles," Ryan said. The driver was a well-known prostitute named Hazel, who was accompanied by another prostitute.

Ryan testified Hazel said Day was "a regular customer of ours." He recounted what a police sergeant later told him: "[He] explained that the Catholics looked after the Catholics and the Masons looked after the Masons, and short of murder, you just didn't charge a priest."

Ryan alleged his attempts to investigate child sex abuse claims against Day in 1971-72 were stymied by the church and other police officers. At least 15 people eventually claimed abuse by

Day, all after his death in 1978. *Source: news.com.au, 12-8-15*

George C. Yankey, medical director of St. Joseph Hospital in **Koforidua, Ghana**, is accused of serial sexual harassment of female hospital staff. Various news stories describe him as a Catholic priest, brother or seminarian.

After Yankey allegedly wanted to trade sex for a promotion, a nurse set a trap, inviting Yankey to her home with the promise of sex in her husband's absence. After some pleasantries, Yankey undressed and the husband came in the room. "The damning video captured the wretched medical director on his knees begging for clemency," reported Starr News, which put the video online. *Source: GhanaWeb, 12-7-15*

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Australia and New Zealand continues to hear horror stories of historical sexual abuse by clergy. "BVD" testified that when he was a 9-year-old altar boy in 1978 at Our Lady of Carmel in Sunbury, Catholic priest **Peter Searson** started molesting him, ordering him to come inside after washing the priest's car. Searson went from drying the boy's genitals to raping him nearly every Saturday for 6 months. "He told me I would go to hell if I told anyone."

BVD said he feels safe now only when he's home in the dark with the doors locked. *Source: The Guardian, 11-30-15*

Newly released files on sexual abuse by clergy at **St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, MN**, show a Catholic priest had sexual contact with over 200 individuals, including children and adolescents.

The files, made public as part of a court settlement, show that as many as 19 abbey monks may have molested hundreds of children over decades.

Another man recorded the names of dozens of boys he brought to a cabin, some of whom he sexually abused. Another abuser was paid \$30,000 by the abbey to support him after he left the clergy.

"We still need to get our voices out to people who have not come forward," said Troy Bramlage, a victim who was included in the settlement. *Source: Star Tribune, 11-26-15*

Removed / Resigned

David F. Dzermejko, 66, Braddock, PA, incarcerated at the Federal Medical Center in Devens, MA, since April 2014 on a conviction for possession of child pornography, has been removed from the Catholic priesthood. The Diocese of Pittsburgh removed Dzermejko from ministry in 2009 after allegations he molested children, but he technically remained a priest until Oct. 31, when the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith dismissed him from the clerical state. *Source: Post-Gazette, 12-23-15*

Albert J. Gondek, Lexington, NC, was placed on administrative leave as pastor of Our Lady of the Rosary Catholic Church due to an allegation he sexually touched a man who was 18 about 5 years ago.

Gondek was investigated in 2007 for a similar allegation but was reinstated. *Source: WGHP, 12-21-15*

John O'Keefe, 70, Pearl River, NY, pastor of St. Margaret of Antioch Catholic Church and former head of Archbishop Stepinac High School, has been accused of twice molesting a minor in the early 1980s and has been placed on leave during an investigation. The incidents are beyond the statute of limitations for criminal prosecution. *Source: lohud.com, 12-19-15*

David Placette, Port Arthur, TX, was placed on administrative leave by the Diocese of Beaumont as pastor of St. Catherine's Catholic Church during investigation by church and civil authorities of an allegation at the parish school. He's been St. Catherine's pastor since 2013. *Source: Beaumont Enterprise, 12-17-15*

James E. Dorff, 68, San Antonio, TX, resigned as bishop of the United Methodist Church's Rio Texas Conference, which includes about 400 congregations. He also surrendered his ministerial credentials.

In his letter, Dorff apologized for an extramarital "transgression" and said he had not "upheld the sacred vows" he made at his 1975 wedding to his wife Barbara. *Source: Express-News, 12-8-15*

Ivan Petunov, 35, was suspended as pastor of a Russian Orthodox parish in Petrozavodsk. Petunov is under investigation for killing a female pedestrian in the Republic of Karelia with his Skoda Fabia car.

"If it is confirmed that the priest was indeed driving while intoxicated, there can be no moral justification for this," said a church statement. *Source: Moscow Times, 12-2-15*

Jesús Delgado, 77, vicar general of the Archdiocese of San Salvador, was suspended as a Catholic bishop after admitting he molested a young girl.

Msgr. Rafael Urrutia, the archdiocese's head of external affairs, said Delgado "is willing to meet with the victim [now 42] to ask her forgiveness." *Source: AP, 11-26-15*

Sharing the crank mail

Our mail is like a box of chocolates, we never know what we're gonna get. But here's a taste, with comments printed as received.

Your website is disgruntled and meaningless: Message: Your website has a quiz mocking peoples education about the Bible. Your questions isolate issues in the Bible, that I know for a fact your staff HAS NO IDEA how to understand. You are not people of the book, you are childish mockers of the book. Your entire organization is a faith group bent on the worship and zealotry of Richard Darwin's Study. May God look over you. — *Matthew Smithson, California*
your uneducated leader Annie Laurie Gaylor: Your leader Mr. Annie Galor is either an idiot in search of a village or he is on drugs. I would also like to say YOU ALSO HAVE NO FREEDOM FROM RELIGION!! Please be my guest and go to the middle east, preferably Syria, and shout you beliefs there. I don't expect an answer since you have no defense. — *Keith Rohlmeier, Edmond, Okla.*

Who started the universe?: If there's no Deity, how did everything get started? — *John Schwarting, Live Oak, Texas*

Your inappropriate networking activities: Im really fed up with you guys trying to follow my allies around and harass us in one shape or another. Your use of networking into federal government is the kind of thing president kennedy warned the people about. I will let the President of the United States know what kind of defamation and civil harassment you guys are engaging in in the name of democracy. Kindly cease and desist from your forced marketing ad hosting of the film "Spotlight" as well. I will direct either the French and or Jeff Mace from Kearny NJ to create undue technical logistical problems for your harassing media endeavors. You are to cease and desist from entering CBN, Lincoln Center, Brooklyn New York near DUMBO. Do you understand? YES? GOOD. — *Jean Kim, Kearny, N.J.*

Concord High School Nativity Scene: Tell Annie Laurie Gaylor that since her jaw dropped about the Nativity scene she can just suck my dick. I know Christians shouldn't say something like that but then someone like her should just put her mouth to good use. — *Connor Kaisch, Texas*

harris county sheriff jolley: I am from Waukesha County in the town of Vernon, Wis. I left that hellhole of a state. Just as that corrupt governor Doyle was leaving office! You liberal jerks are one of the reasons I got the Hell out of that state and went somewhere free of People like you in East Texas! If it weren't for men like

Sheriff Holley and Vietnam veterans like me, my dad in Ww II , my grandpa in Ww I, you would not have the rights to express your twisted opinion. — *Rob Painter*

Bibles: You offend me but I can't remove your face from the internetdoesn't that as sound ridiculous? GOD be with you — *Laura D*

Bullies with no respect: What a bunch of bullies you are. You go around demanding things from your little itty bitty tiny group of "over 22500 members" like your shit doesn't stink. But you know what you are the minority. By pushing your extreme agenda you are only making people hate you more and more and are going to bring about your own demise. You make demands like little children and go cry to some libtard judge until you get your way. — *Brandon Culp*

Bibles in hotels: Please, please, PLEASE stop with your inane crusade to remove religion from every place and every event you do not like. God was here before you and will be here LONG after you leave. If you don't like something, turn your head, change the channel, or close the drawer and leave the Bible in there. You people are just as bad as the NAACP and labor unions. — *Douglas Nodurft*

A high school nativity play ? You blocked that ?: Hey assholes- you people are on my shit list. Keep up your trash. We are Conservative Americans, who believe in this nation. Under God. We will push back. — *David Laity*

Heathens: That crap you pulled at Concord Highschool in Indiana proves how ignorant

and petty you are. You are no better than ISIS. The school will probably go on with the Nativity Scene anyway.Please leave our country and especially Indiana. You're stinking up our air. — *Nancy Erie*

Freedom: people like you over the years have caused a decay in the foundation of this country and you obviously do not understand the constitution and twist it in to suit your own agenda. If it was good in the 50's its good now.no new or updated interpretation needed. Your violating their 2nd amendment rights!! — *Shawn Harper*

Live nativity scene: fuck you and your bull-shit non christian family whining about a scene about mary and jesus. FUCK YOU — *Kelly Diehl*

Ignorant: While in military I was killed....I was dead for two hours....I have walked on the other side of life for two hours I've seen heaven I've seen hell...the bible states that everyone that includes all of you...will one day bow before Jesus Christ....in life to salvation, or after death to punishment...you might not believe in God this side of life but on the other side everyone believes.... — *Dan Fuller*

Bibles in hotels: There were no school shootings until you helped chase prayer out of school. Organizations like yours are as reprehensible as any terrorist organization — *Neil English*

Your lame-ass organization: You assholes are no better than the ISIS bastards that are trying to destroy America. Head on back to Russia, China, Iran where you belong and will most likely get killed by those folks. It would be the sweet-

est thing for all you folks to hang from the rafters upside down until you heads explode. Fuck you and the mothers that bore you. — *Bill Winkler*

Something you need to know: There is a God. Something can't come from nothing so something must be eternal. It can't be energy because it would all be unusable by now and virtual particles have been proven to be created by already existing energy. Matter would all be dust by now because of the natural order of decay. God is the only logical explanation for our existence. — *Jenifer Carrico*

Tolerance: You folks are no better than the church that wants to shut down the tittie-bar. They have a REASON! It might impact... You have a REASON! It might impact...

I knw you won't stop. Why? For the same reason they won't \$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$

YOU ARE BOGUS. and you know it. — *Bret Loomis*

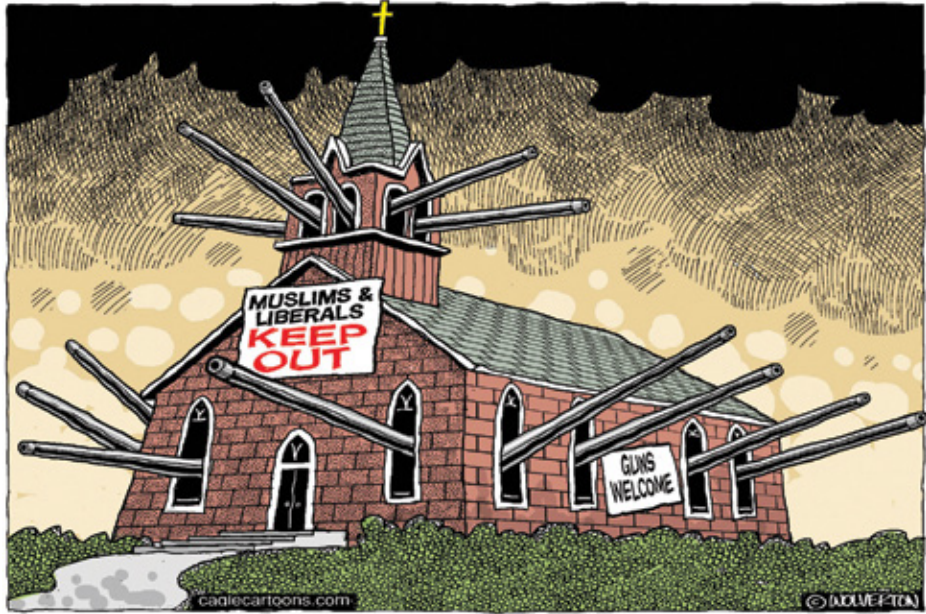
Religious displays in parks: You can be free from religion if you wish. That's your right. But we are sick and tired of you treading on our rights for our religion. Back off and stay out of Mississippi. We don't need any help from you to run our state. The majority is supposed to rule. Not one over everyone else. — *Gail Williams, Mississippi*

Let me try to figure this out: I will pray that only more conviction will come upon your scheme of destroying your great nation. Keep looking up because the fairy tale is coming soon, or shall I say the reality of Jesus Christ in all of His glory. — *Brian Plum, London, Ontario*

Stop: I need y'all to hear me out. I am 19 years old and have been a Christian since I was born, even though I was saved and baptized at 9. I heard about the 'In God We Trust' decal article and that has crossed the line! My dad is an officer and a Christian. Please don't say I'm pushing my religion on y'all because I'm not. Y'all are pushing your views on me. Jesus is my SAVIOR, not my religion! He can be your Savior, too. I know y'all know that. Anyway, please email me back? My intention really is not to verbally fight, but to further the Kingdom. — *Caroline Billiot, Bossier City, La.*

You Fags: Hi faggotts. Picketed any fire stations lately for expressing their freedom of speech? Screw ALL of you. Hell has a special place reserved just for you!!! — *Jerry Babbitt*

you fucking people deserve to go back to the monkeys you came from: You are truly a pathetic bunch of douchebags. I hope none of you asswiping goat fuckers celebrate Christmas, you hypocritical bunch of turd ticklers. Get a life and please stay out of everyone elses. — *Tim Delaney*



Tara Clifford essay

Continued from page 20

holy books calling for death do not make peace.

This reminds me of the Mormons. Like everyone else, they take 15 steps back when the term "fundamentalist" is mentioned, but they are in the same rocky boat as every other religion. Mormonism has a hidden gem in it, opening it to a whole new world of violence and destruction. The Doctrine and Covenants 91-92 state "...the duty of the President of the office of the High Priesthood is to... be a seer, a revelator, a translator, and a prophet..." This means that whoever is in charge

can change God's word on a whim. Did you know that God told Warren Jeffs to rape little boys and marry and then rape little girls? Because he is the mouth of God for his sect, his own brothers did not even question his actions as they held down their 5-year old nephew for Warren Jeffs to rape. Since it was all in his head, there is no existing reference in a holy book about this crime, but it was still God's will after all.

A possible solution seems simple on paper, but may be next to impossible to accomplish. Religion is a system of brainwashing. It tells you to believe no matter what. One is to abandon reason and critical thinking and just believe in things that do not make sense. So

then, how can we expect people to go through their holy book with discernment, deciding they will only follow some of God's word but not all? The solution is education. At the very least, if people had an education they would develop reason and critical thinking. Then they could pervert their religion and not follow blindly.

To say that religions do not condone violence, terrorism and senseless murder is laughable, at best. All you have to do is pick up one of the holy books and read through their pages. That is why I am proud to be an atheist. I will never have to follow something blindly or try to make excuses for a god and his actions. Instead of destroying

this life for a rewarding afterlife, I will make this life better because it is all we have.

Tara Clifford, 30, was born in New Jersey but currently resides in Olyphant, Penn. She is working toward a graduate degree in mental health counseling from Marywood University, which is where she also got a B.A. in communication arts. She plans to graduate in May 2018 and hopes to be accepted into a doctoral program. She is a 20-year vegetarian who loves reading about religious cults, dreaming about what the country will be like with Bernie Sanders as president, and spending time with her husband and two cats.

Sara Rose essay

Continued from page 21

are many who feel that their actions and fate are out of their control and in the hands of god(s). This absolves them of personal responsibility. Additionally, the idea of life after death may lead people to believe that killing others is not a way of ending their existence, but merely moving them from this plane of existence to some other, where they will no longer pose a threat. They do not remotely comprehend the permanence and absoluteness of their actions. Without such influence, many soldiers would have difficulty killing another man without hesitation. Furthermore, there is a connection be-

tween the perceived authority a deity has over a believer's body and the actions that person can be expected to take on behalf of their god. If a person believes that their religion has a say in what they do to their body, and there is a significant affront to their religious beliefs, that person could be driven to the most extreme acts of religious violence: suicide terrorism.

The function and scale of religion relating to violence is staggering. Religion is meant to provide morals, alleviate fear of death, and attempt to explain the complex. It is outrageous that something which should bring order to a person's life can be twisted into the driving force of destruction. A few modern leaders do have some

ideas for peace that may help to quell such violence in the future, though. Marc Gopin, director of the Center for World Religions, asserts that Jewish peacemaking in the Middle East may need to begin with mourning, which is a large part of Jewish tradition. The Quran states, "If God had so willed, he would have made you one community but he wanted to test you . . ." which should act as a call for peace.

Amid the religious turbulence of Nigeria, two men have found a way to turn their religious animosity into a positive force for their community. Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye began their journey as bitter enemies, but have since come together, and encouraged their fol-

lowers to put an end to the extreme religious terrorism of Kaduna. These men serve as an example for the kind of change the world's religious leaders need to take, and does provide the tiniest glimmer of hope. Unfortunately, the nature of religion, combined with a growing global population, and an unwillingness to change among many groups, still leaves the world at the mercy of religious war.

Sara is 26 and grew up in rural Massachusetts. She has lived in 17 homes in nine cities in four states. She is now residing in Bend, Ore., and attends Oregon State University. She is majoring in natural resources and minoring in sustainability with a planned graduation in June 2017.

In memoriam

Todd Gardner, 1930–2015

FFRF Life Member Todd Gardner, 85, of Palm Springs, Calif., died on Oct. 15, 2015.

Todd worked for the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco from 1951-1998, and was assistant manager at the time of his retirement.

He was together with his partner Gary Gray, also a Life Member, for 30 years, including the last two years as spouses. “We got married by the mayor of Palm Springs,” Gary said.

Todd had been a member of FFRF since 1990 and a Life Member since 2010.

FFRF sends heartfelt condolences to Gary and others who knew Todd.

Jerry H. Jeffery Jr., 1947–2014

Jerry H. Jeffery Jr., 67, of Maitland, Fla., died Aug. 21, 2014. Jerry was born Aug. 4, 1947, in Newport, Ark. He is survived by his wife Anita and two children, Samatha and Michael Jeffery.

Jeffery, an attorney, worked with FFRF’s 2014 case against the Orange County (Fla.) School Board for allowing a private group to distribute bibles to 11 schools within the district and, alternatively, to allow FFRF to distribute materials.

Harry Robertson, 1941–2015

Longtime FFRF member Harry Robertson of Lahaina, Hawaii, died at Maui Memorial Medical Center on Oct. 8 at the age of 73, after a nine-year battle with cancer.

He was born Oct. 18, 1941, in South Africa and attended school there. He graduated with a degree in chemical engineering from the University of Cape Town, where he was a member of the rowing team that won the South African National Championship in 1963.

He came to the U.S. in 1968 and got



FFRF Life Member Todd Gardner, left, died on Oct. 15, 2015. He is shown in the photo with Gary Gray, his partner of 30 years.

a master’s degree in business administration from Cal State-Long Beach and then went to work for Fluor Corp. He retired after 29 years and moved to Hawaii, where he remained active in the community. He enjoyed traveling, visiting six continents and more than 25 countries.

Harry is survived by his wife of 35 years, Peggy Odell Robertson, and two children, Reed Odell Robertson and Kate Robertson Marks.

Peggy wrote the following in a letter to FFRF in November:

“We had been reading Freethought Today for over 30 years and started a Freethought Society here in Maui for a couple of years. Harry and I would divide the newspaper (Freethought Today) as soon as it would come and discuss how great it was.

“Harry was a gracious, kind, thoughtful scholar and a gentleman that everyone liked, besides being an immigrant and accomplishing much in life. I received hundreds of letters and emails from all over the world describing Harry as a wonderful man. I wrote down four pages of adjectives that de-

scribed him and read them all to our Poetry Society, and at the end I told them he was an atheist and everyone applauded!”

FFRF sends its sincerest condolences to Peggy and those who knew Harvey.

Don Worrell, 1923-2015

Don Worrell, an FFRF Lifetime Member and former Board of Directors member representing Alabama, died on Dec. 16, 2015, in Huntsville, Ala., at the age of 92.

He was graduate of the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, with degrees in journalism and business administration.

He served as an Infantry rifleman in the Battle of the Bulge in World War II, where his feet were frozen and he was hit by artillery shrapnel “right square in the buttocks,” Don said, “as Forrest Gump put it.” He received the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star with V for Valor.

He worked as a reporter and news editor on newspapers in Columbus, Ga., Newport News, Va., Norman, Okla., and Tuscaloosa before joining

NASA’s Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville as an information specialist. “In plain language, a PR man,” Don explained. Among his duties was speechwriter for the center director, Dr. Wernher von Braun, the German-born creator of the Saturn V Moon rocket.

As Don pointed out, “Dr. von Braun was also the creator of the V-2 rockets, which we used to see flying over our foxholes in Belgium a decade earlier on their way to their targets in London — to me, a rather ironic, even absurdist, commentary on warfare in general.”

An enthusiastic (“but totally untalented”) golfer from age 12 into his 90s, Don made four holes-in-one along the way. “The first three were luck,” he admitted. “But that fourth one was pure skill.” After a long pause, “Well, maybe not.”

A paying hobby was teaching ballroom dancing, also into his 90s. “I almost made enough to pay for my golf,” he laughed. He claimed to be the world’s oldest living ballroom dance teacher.”

Don is survived by his wife, Naoko, whom he met in 1959, when she was his tour guide during his visit to her hometown of Kyoto, Japan. They have a son, Ken, also of Huntsville.

Per Don’s wishes, no funeral services were held.

He liked the epitaph: “Once I wasn’t. Then I was. Now I ain’t again.” And, to quote Richard Dawkins, “Being dead will be no different than being unborn. I shall be just as I was in the time of William the Conqueror or the dinosaurs.”

“We will greatly miss Don, a warm and vital presence at many national conventions and events at Lake Hypatia, Ala., with the Alabama Freethought Society chapter,” said FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.

FFRF on the road



‘Battle of Church & State’ topic of Rochester talk

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor spoke to a standing-room only gathering on Dec. 7 at the Brighton Memorial Library in Brighton, N.Y., sponsored by the Rochester Chapter of Americans United and local National Organization for Women.

Pictured: AU Board Member Jim Swarts, Annie Laurie, FFRF member Carol Hoffman and the famous Linda Stephens, vice president of the Rochester Chapter of AU and FFRF Lifetime Member. Linda and Susan Galloway, who videotaped the speech, were the determined plaintiffs in *Greece v. Galloway*, challenging governmental prayer. Although the Supreme Court decision last year did not go their way, it paved the way for protest “secular invocations,” including FFRF’s Nothing Fails Like Prayer Contest. Annie Laurie enjoyed the reunion with many longtime FFRF New York friends and members and walking down the Susan B. Anthony Concourse at the Rochester airport.

Black collar crimes

Continued from page 25

George Passias, 67, Manhattan, NY, was officially relieved of his priestly duties at St. Spyridon Church after a unanimous vote in Istanbul by the Greek Orthodox Holy and Sacred Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Passias had resigned after allegations he impregnated the married parish school principal Ethel Bouzalas, 45, a native Peruvian.

Videos were leaked to media showing the couple having oral sex and Bouzalas indulging in “cake porn” (grinding her thong-clad bottom on banana bread wrapped in cellophane) as Passias watched. *Source: NY Post, 11-30-15*

Other

After **Joseph T. Neill, 39, Shelbyville, TN**, a Baptist youth pastor, was convicted of possession of prepubescent child pornography stemming from a probe of his alleged sexual relationship with a 16-year-old female congregant, state House Majority Whip **Jeremy Durham**, R-Franklin, wrote the sentencing judge a letter asking for leniency for Neill.

Durham declined to say how he knew Neill and why he wrote the letter using the House letterhead. He said in a text message that media coverage was “just another witch hunt.” Neill

was eventually sentenced to 3 years in prison.

Durham told the judge that Neill came from “a very reputable family deeply committed to Christian service. He has served as a missionary across the country leading numerous people to accept Jesus Christ as their savior.”

According to records made public in December, prosecutors sought to indict Durham for falsifying the date on 2 prescriptions and trying to fill them in 2013. A grand jury declined to indict him in January 2014. *Source: AP, 12-11-15*

After an unidentified, elderly **South African mohel** cut off the entire tip of a baby’s penis instead of just the foreskin during ritual circumcision, a formal commission of inquiry has recommended accreditation and licensing to oversee the practice.

Accreditation would have to be renewed every 2 years and take into account factors such as “age, state of health of the mohel and any complaints received . . . which bear on his competence to continue performing brit mila.”

Chief Rabbi Warren Goldstein confirmed he will implement the recommendations and impose a lifetime ban against the malpracticing mohel. *Source: Jerusalem Post, 11-30-15*

Email: blackcollar@ffrf.org

RECRUIT A MEMBER

sample copies for \$2

Send \$2 with the name and address of each person you wish to receive a sample copy of Freethought Today to:

FFRF • P.O. Box 750 • Madison, WI 53701

(Please specify whether the individual is a freethinker.)

Freedom depends upon freethinkers

Secular invocations



Steven Belstra and his daughter, Cambria

Steven Belstra
Grandville, Mich., City Council
Dec. 27, 2015

After the *Town of Greece vs. Galloway* decision allowing sectarian prayers at certain public meetings, Michigan resident Steven Belstra wanted to let his city council know that there were more than just Christians in its constituency.

“Every time the council had an invocation, it was done by a pastor of some local church,” Belstra writes. “People who aren’t religious needed some representation. I wouldn’t have done it at all if there weren’t prayers already taking place at every single other council meeting.”

Here is the invocation given by Belstra:

Thank you, Mayor Maas and the Grandville City Council, for having me speak today. My name is Steven Belstra and I am not an ordained minister or priest of any faith. I request from the council and our community that we don’t turn toward faith or religion to guide government decisions, but rather good will toward all people in our community.

I speak for the minorities in the area who identify as being secular humanists, atheists and one of the fastest growing groups in America, the non-religious. Grandville contains many different people who have different beliefs, traditions and cultures, all of which we want to see considered when making decisions for our community. I ask that for today and all future meetings we can approach decisions this way. But it isn’t just in our local city council meetings where this should apply, but in all other aspects of human interaction.

2015 will be remembered as a year that major human rights decisions were made in the *Obergefell vs. Hodges* case, which granted state recognition to all same-sex couples. This decision by the Supreme Court of the United States is a great example of what I am alluding to.

It is in our best interest as a community to view all of our citizens as equals, regardless of their beliefs about an afterlife or their beliefs about human sexuality. So what I ask of my local city council is that you govern with reason and empathy toward all people, regardless of the church I do or don’t attend, the person who I marry, or the beliefs that you may or may not share with other citizens of the community. Thank you for your time, council.

Steven Belstra, 26, is a business systems

analyst who worked with FFRF in 2013 trying, unsuccessfully, to erect a Winter Solstice banner next to a nativity scene in Fremont, Mich.

Terry Sunday
El Paso, Texas, City Council
Oct. 6, 2015

FFRF member Terry Sunday, a “retired aerospace engineer, inveterate world traveler, ethnic cook, prolific Amazon reviewer and lifelong atheist,” gave the following secular invocation to the El Paso City Council:

Good morning, Mayor, City Council representatives and fellow El Pasoans,

As we meet to conduct the business of the city of El Paso, we must always bear in mind that we all have different needs, wants, views and beliefs. We like and dislike different things, we harbor different notions of right and wrong, we have different levels of tolerance for others’ lifestyles, and we envision our roles in society differently.

But surely we can agree that our actions will succeed only to the extent that they best serve the interests of all El Pasoans.

While differences in ethnicity, gender identity, age, religious viewpoint, sexual orientation, skin color, political affiliation and other things distinguish each of us from another, in America we are all equal under the law. Our common ancestors applied their intellects and skills to benefit humankind and bring us to where we are here today. We can do no better than to continue that timeless practice.

As we consider issues in today’s meeting:

- Let us show each other respect, tolerance and kindness.
 - Let us listen intently and thoughtfully to each other.
 - Let us graciously acknowledge and sincerely consider opposing viewpoints.
 - Let us demonstrate reason, common sense, cooperativeness and a willingness to compromise.
 - Let us commit to do what is right and just, not only in letter but in spirit as well.
 - Let us conduct today’s meeting with honesty, civility, integrity and open-mindedness.
 - And finally, let us always act inclusively, morally, openly, professionally and in the best interests of all the citizens of El Paso.
- Now make it so.
Thank you.

Shop with ease at FFRF online

Looking to proudly display your atheism? Want to give the gift of freethought?

Check out FFRF’s online store at ffrf.org/shop. This isn’t just shameless self-promotion, it’s a good way to help FFRF fight the battle of church and state, which is also the title of a Dan Barker tune on “Friendly Neighborhood Athe-



own. FFRF offers a variety of items, including music, new and used freethought books, apparel, greeting cards, DVDs/video, tote bags, pins, bumper stickers and much more. New clothing items for sale are the “In Chef We Trust” apron, “Unabashed Atheist” tee and “Out of the Closet Atheist” and Dawkins-inspired “A” caps.



Gonna find out who’s naughty or nice
“While vacationing in Farmington, New Mexico, my husband and I saw this billboard and couldn’t resist. Both sides are worth a chuckle,” writes Candace Kant from Nevada.

NOTHING FAILS LIKE PRAYER

Contest

The U.S. Supreme Court unwisely “blessed” sectarian prayers at local government meetings in its *Town of Greece v. Galloway* decision. If the Supreme Court won’t uphold our godless and entirely secular Constitution — adopted at a prayerless constitutional convention — it’s up to us.

It’s up to you!

We’d like to see secular citizens flood government meetings with secular invocations that illustrate why government prayers are unnecessary, ineffective, embarrassing, exclusionary, divisive or just plain silly.

The “best” secular invocation will be invited to open FFRF’s annual convention, receiving an all-expenses-paid trip (next year in Pittsburgh on the weekend of Oct. 7–9, 2016), a plaque and an honorarium of \$500.

LEARN MORE AT:
ffrf.org/outreach/nothing-fails-like-prayer